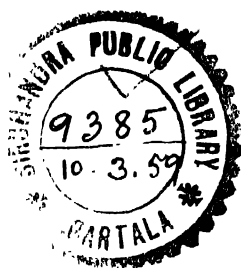


THE LISTENING CHILD

THE LISTENING CHILD

THREE SHORT NOVELS BY

Rosemary Timperley



LONDON
JAMES BARRIE

1916

First published 1916

PRINTED AND BOUND IN GREAT BRITAIN BY
THE GARDEN CITY PRESS LIMITED
LEITCHWORTH, HERTFORDSHIRE

to
James Barrie
whose kindness and encouragement
caused this book to be written.

BOOK ONE

THE LISTENING CHILD

1

BLUE dusk was falling in the street, softening bleak outlines of houses, making even the factory chimney a thing of mystery. The trains still screamed across the bridge at the end of Canver Row, but now, with their lighted windows, like enormous caterpillars with a hundred bright eyes, they had their own strange beauty. It was the time of autumn day I liked best—not dark enough for fear and uncertainty, but blue and mysterious.

Mysterious. I loved things mysterious in those days. People who have never contacted real mystery do love it—the artificial thrill up the spine, the delicious shivers of mock fear. I was to learn that mystery can be more terrible than tangible fear.

Yet there was nothing mysterious about the house itself on that evening when it all began. I was in the steamy, brightly lit kitchen, preparing my husband's supper. The usual noises surrounded me, noises I no longer consciously heard—the trains, the traffic, the woman next door calling her children in, a loud radio across the narrow street, factory sirens, a clang of fire bells in the distance. The noise I consciously listened for, quite a small noise, was that of my husband's key in the lock.

Now the sausages were sizzling under the grill, the potatoes boiling merrily, little knowing, poor things, that they were soon to be mashed into pulp, the tin of baked beans rattling in a small pan alongside them.

Then Linda came in.

'Mum,' she said, 'can you hear the music?'

'The radio? Yes, it's across the street. They've no right to have it on so loudly.'

'No, not that. The violin.'

I couldn't hear it, but children have sharp ears. I said: 'It's probably a street musician. Would you like to take him a penny?'

'Yes, please.' She stood there, my little twelve-year-old daughter, small, thin and pale, but wiry enough, her dark eyes excited, her hair straggling like an uneven black curtain about her shoulders.

'Take a penny out of my bag, then, Linda, and mind you come straight back. No wandering about in the streets at this hour.'

'All right.' She streaked off. I heard the jingle of coins, the slam of the front door, the quick clatter of her feet on the path. I leaned out of the kitchen window for a second, listening for the sound of violin music, but could not hear it.

Ten minutes later Linda still wasn't back. I didn't worry. Perhaps the man had moved on and she'd followed him a short way. Perhaps she was talking to him. She often spoke to people in the street in spite of my warnings—'But why shouldn't I speak to people, Mum? They're so nice.' You can't tell a child of twelve that people aren't nice at all. Let them keep their illusions as long as they can.

The meal was just ready as I heard my husband's key in the lock.

'Hello, Tom,' I called. 'Is Linda out there?'

'No. Should she be?'

'She went out to give a penny to a street musician half an hour ago.'

'Half an hour!' He came into the kitchen, his shoulders in broad silhouette against the light behind him, his brown hair on end because of the habit he had of passing his fingers upwards through it so that it stood up like a shaving brush. 'What on earth can she be doing?' he said.

'I don't know.'

For the first time I felt the touch of fear. My heart-beats seemed to slow down slightly. A chill passed over me.

'Oh, perhaps she's met a friend. You know what a chatterbox she is sometimes,' I said. 'The meal's ready, Tom, when you are.'

'Keep it hot,' he said. 'I'll look outside for Linda.'

I turned the gases low and returned to the living-room. I poked the fire and plumped up the cushions. I thought I was quite calm in my mind but found my hands were trembling. I stood for a minute and stared at my own face in the mirror above the mantelpiece. I looked gaunt and scared, wide blue eyes, pale hair drawn starkly back from my brow.

Why didn't Tom come back? Where was Linda?

Tom's voice startled me. He had come in quietly.

'I can't find her. It's getting dark,' he said.

We stood, staring at each other.

'Did you look next door?'

'Yes. Mrs. Renton said she called her kids in half an hour ago. Linda's not there.'

'Oh, Tom, where can she be?'

'She can't have got lost. She knows these streets as well as we do. No need to worry.'

'I'm going to look for her,' I said. 'Have your supper. I shan't be long. Probably I'll meet her as she comes along.'

I left the house before he had time to protest and ran along the street calling: 'Linda, Linda!'

No one took any notice of me. The sight of a mother calling her child in was a commonplace in Canver Row.

The infrequent street lamps cast pools of dull gold on the dark pavements. The street was full of shadows. I told myself that the child had been missing for under an hour, that there were all sorts of reasons why she might not come home straight away. It was naughty of her, but nothing to be frightened about.

'Linda!' I called, my voice high with panic.

'Hello, Mum.' She was there before me, looking just as usual. I wanted to take her in my arms and hold her tightly, to sob my relief and love. But I said harshly:

'Where have you been? You naughty little girl! How dare you stay out at night like this? I've told you time and time again I will not have you wandering about at night in this neighbourhood.'

'I like the dark,' she said.

'I don't care what you like or don't like. Why did you stay out?'

'I followed the music.'

'Followed the music? Linda, talk sense.'

She gave me a quick glance and said nothing.

'Did you give the musician the penny?' I asked, trying to sound calm.

'He didn't want it.'

'Didn't want it? Linda, what *has* happened?'

'Nothing.' Her face was closed, reserved, sulky. I questioned her again but she made no reply.

'Any more antics like this,' I flared, 'and you'll find yourself without pocket-money for the next few weeks.'

At last we were home. Linda walked ahead of me into the living-room, where Tom, with guilty appetite, was demolishing his sausages and mash.

'Well, young fly-by-night,' he said cheerfully, 'what have you been up to?'

'I followed the musician,' she said.

'Pied Piper kid, eh?' he said, and then of course he had to explain what he meant by that. I felt more calm and soothed as I saw my husband and daughter close and safe together by the bright fire. What a fuss I had made about nothing! But I had no appetite for my meal, and that night I slept restlessly. The faint music of a violin kept penetrating my dreams, and I had one brief horrible nightmare in which I pursued Linda for hours in dark streets and never quite overtook her.

In the morning I felt breathless, as if I had been running all night.

IN contrast to my frightening night, the day seemed wonderfully bright and clear. Winter sunshine, primrose pale, poured through the kitchen window as I fried Tom's eggs and bacon and made

the toast. Linda was singing in the bathroom, an unfamiliar, haunting, uneasy little melody. Tom was poking the fire and shouting:

'Grub up! I'm famished!'

Then we were all three round the breakfast table, golden marmalade gleaming in a shaft of sunlight, cereal dropping rich and crisp from the large packet, thick brown tea in the large cups, and the radio news, solemn, unlistened to, in the background.

'How's my little Pied Piperess?' said Tom to Linda. They laughed together. Then the factory sirens began and Tom rushed away, leaving Linda and me to finish our meal in a more leisurely manner.

The radio news and 'Programme Parade' were over now. Music on gramophone records came next. Linda was glancing through a highly coloured comic which had just arrived when she looked up, her eyes very bright, and said:

'What's that tune?'

The delicate orchestral music filled the room.

'It's the "Valse Triste" by Sibelius.'

'What does that mean?'

'Literally "Sad Waltz", but "triste" is a little more poignant than "sad", somehow. When you listen to that you're supposed to imagine a haunted ballroom, dark and silent at first, then as the music swells ghostly couples of the past come out of the shadow and dance. As the music fades, they vanish into the darkness again.'

'It's beautiful,' said Linda. 'It's rather like his music.'

'What music?'

'The violin I heard . . . ' She stopped and looked guilty.

'Linda, I want you to tell me something more about—'

'Oh, please listen, it's not finished!'

We listened in silence until the record ended. Then she switched off the radio.

'I hope he comes back,' she said.

Now I was frightened, without quite knowing why.

'Linda, if that man comes back, you're to stay in the house.'

'Yes, Mum,' she said meekly. Too meekly. She didn't look at me as she spoke. Her face was secret.

'I won't have you following strange men in the street.'

'He's not a strange man.'

'Yes he is. You don't know him.'

'But I do.'

'You do know him? Then why didn't you say so before? Who is it?'

'I don't mean I know his name or anything, but I know him. I know him!'

'Linda, who is this man?' I almost shouted.

'I must go to school now,' she said, 'or I shall be late.'

She darted out of the room. I heard her collecting her coat and satchel, of books, then with a quick 'Bye, Mum!' she was tearing down the path and along the road to the school.

I was left with the washing up and all the other chores and a sick shadow of worry that I couldn't dispel.

Later in the morning Mrs. Renton from next door—a small, sharp-featured woman with a large family and an even larger collection of floral overalls which she wore constantly—came to borrow some sugar. She was an inveterate borrower and often she irritated me. Today, however, I was glad to see her.

'Mrs. Renton, did you hear a street violinist yesterday evening?' I asked her.

'Can't say I did, but my family make such a racket about the house that I don't hear much of what goes on outside.'

'Have you ever heard a musician in these parts?'

'Gracious, yes! There are several. Fiddlers, barrel organists, singers—you've heard them yourself.'

'Yes, of course I have.' Mrs. Renton made my fears seem ridiculous. What could be more natural than that a child should follow a violinist through the streets for a time, enchanted by a lovely melody? When Linda said she knew the man she simply meant that she'd seen him playing in the streets before. Then I remembered something:

'I suppose they all collect money,' I said.

Mrs. Renton looked at me as if I were slightly mad and answered: 'Why else should the poor fellows play in the streets in this freezing weather? For love?'

'Perhaps. They might be serenading their girl friends.' I tried to joke about it.

She laughed. 'Why all this interest in street musicians?'

'Oh, Linda heard one last night, that's all.'

'Kids love street entertainers. Mine will follow them round for hours. I remember my Tommy disappeared once for a whole day—he'd tacked himself on to one of those Salvation Army bands. Something about the rhythm had just got him and he couldn't tear himself away. Irene's different. She goes for the barrel-organs. There's an old man with a monkey comes round. I expect you've seen him. He and Irene are good pals. She gives him sweets and buys nuts for his monkey. You know, well-off people say it's bad for children to be about in the streets, but I think it does them good. They meet all sorts of people, they learn to be independent, they learn more about life than they do at school.'

'It scares me when Linda stays out.' •

'That's because she's an only child. If you had four like me you wouldn't have time to worry. You'd be too busy cooking and mending for them.'

'I suppose you're right. I don't want Linda to feel tied to my apron-strings. Oh, Mrs. Renton, you have cheered me up.'

'You're a worrier,' she said with a smile. 'You're not looking too well, either, dear. Don't you sleep well?'

'Usually I sleep like a log, but last night I was restless.'

'Then if I were you I'd have a rest this afternoon, then you'll be fresh when your husband comes home.'

I took Mrs. Renton's advice. I let the rest of the housework go that afternoon, settled on the couch with my feet up and a pile of darning, and listened to the radio. 'Woman's House' was on. Usually the coy, patronizing voices of the women on this programme, with their household hints that weren't hints at all

but were things ordinary housewives had been doing for years, irritated me so violently that I had to switch off, but today I hardly heard them. The voices were a dim background to my own thoughts. When the socks were finished I leant back and closed my eyes. Eagerly sleep seized my tired mind and body.

When I woke, the room was dark but for the dull glow of the fire. Outside it was dusk. A pleasant, confident voice was saying: 'The general weather forecast for tomorrow . . .'

Weather forecast! Whatever time was it?

I sprang up, my heart banging, and put on the light. It was almost six o'clock and I'd done nothing about the evening meal.

And where was Linda?

She should have been home over an hour ago. Perhaps she was in her bedroom.

'Linda,' I called at the foot of the stairs. 'Are you up there?'

Silence. I looked at the hall-stand. There was no sign of her coat or satchel. Could she have come in, seen me asleep, and gone out to play? Perhaps she was next door.

My clothes still dishevelled, my hair untidy, I hurried to Mrs. Renton's house. I went straight to the back door. Mrs. Renton was in the kitchen washing dishes after the children's tea and Irene was drying them. Irene was twelve, the same age as Linda and in the same class at school. She was a plump little fair girl with very rosy cheeks.

'Mrs. Renton, is Linda here?'

'No. Isn't she home? Was Linda kept in at school for anything, Irene?'

'No,' said Irene. 'Linda never gets kept in. She's ever so good. She was top of the class last term.'

'Do you know where she is, Irene?' I asked.

'No. We left school together, then she went off.'

'Did she say where she was going?'

Irene shook her head, then gave me a small, sly glance that unnerved me. 'Irene, you must tell me if you know,' I said sharply.

'I don't know anything.' She looked straight at me, blue eyes wide and innocent.

Tommy Renton wandered in. He was a year younger than his sister, a wisp of a boy, pale and silent.

'Tommy, have you seen Linda?' asked his mother.

'She went with the man,' said Tommy absent-mindedly.

'What!' I gasped.

Tommy stepped back, his face suddenly alert.

'What man?' I asked frantically.

'I don't know.'

'Didn't you see him?'

'No.'

'Tommy, you must tell me the truth. Please! Did you see this man?' I went down on one knee before the little boy and put my hand on his shoulder. He fidgeted and turned his head away.

'I didn't see him,' he insisted.

'Then how do you know she went with a man at all?'

'I heard him,' said Tommy, then he jerked himself out of my grip and ran out of the kitchen.

'It's no good trying to get anything out of kids,' said Mrs. Renton. 'They live in a little secret world of their own.'

'If it were one of your own children missing you wouldn't be so unconcerned!'

'Well, I wouldn't let myself get into a state about it,' said Mrs. Renton. 'Linda will most likely be home by the time you get back. There, listen!'

I heard voices outside. My husband's voice. And Linda's. Relief flooded through me like a warm tide.

'I'm sorry for making a fuss, Mrs. Renton,' I said, and ran out to meet them.

They were indoors by the time I got there.

'Linda, why didn't you come home?' I asked her.

'I went to meet Dad at the factory gates.'

'Yes, bless her heart, it was a treat to see her,' said Tom happily. 'I haven't had a girl friend wait outside for me for years and years,' and he grinned at me, remembering the early days when we were so much in love and I met him outside every day.

'But you don't leave the factory until six. Linda stops school

at four. It doesn't take two hours to get from one place to the other. Where were you in between, Linda?'

'I walked slowly to the factory.'

'For two hours.'

'I suppose so. I—I looked in shop windows.'

'Tommy Renton said you were with a man.'

'Then he's a fibber.'

'I want the truth!' I said angrily.

'Steady on, old girl,' said Tom. 'The kid came to meet me. Isn't that enough? Now, how about supper?'

'Oh dear, I haven't even started the meal. I'll have to open a tin. I'm sorry, Tom. I was so worried about Linda's not coming home I nearly went mad.'

He gave me an anxious glance, and when Linda went upstairs he said: 'Do you think you ought to see a doctor, love? Your nerves aren't quite what they should be. Perhaps a tonic . . . '

'My nerves are perfectly all right,' I said. 'When my child doesn't come home, I get upset. What's abnormal about that?'

'Nothing, but now you know where she was . . . '

'We still don't know where she was. I think she only came to meet you so that she'd have an excuse for having been out.'

'And I think she came because I'm her father and she wanted to come,' he said quietly. 'Don't resent her affection for me, love.'

'Resent it! Tom, how could you think that?' My eyes filled with tears. Then his arms were tightly round me. I felt the touch of his hand on my hair, his rough cheek against mine. 'Tom, hold me tight!'

I felt so safe in his arms. His close warmth made former worries seem foolish. He gave me a final kiss and said:

'Now, what about opening that tin? Linda and I are starving.'

'Of course. I'll be as quick as I can.'

Linda was quiet during the meal. Tom talked about the people at work and made me laugh several times, although I still felt he was inclined to treat me as a mental patient. Then I asked Linda to help me with the washing up before she did her

homework. I hoped that, in the warm intimacy of the little kitchen, she might tell me of her own accord how she had spent those two hours. But she said nothing. In silence we dealt with the dishes. It was like having a little stranger in the kitchen instead of my own child.

Were mothers always such strangers to their children as I was to Linda? Although I loved her, I never felt I understood her. She wasn't a bit the way I was myself as a child. Her mind was secret to me. She didn't resemble either me or Tom. I remembered a friend saying: 'She's not like you or your husband, is she?' 'Perhaps she's a changeling,' I had replied, laughing. Now the idea didn't amuse me any more. I turned to look at her to try to see behind the mask of that sensitive, pale face with its deep-set eyes. She was standing by the window, the tea-towel in her hand, staring into the darkness. Her face was rapt, radiant, excited. Yet she could see nothing there. It was too dark.

With a swift, cold shock I realized that she wasn't *looking* at anything.

She was listening.

3

THAT listening expression on Linda's face haunted me. It never left her now. She seemed to have lost her childish gaucherie within a few days and moved about the house with an air of quiet tension. She reminded me of a prisoner who realizes the futility of resisting his captors, but is always on the alert for some miraculous chance of escape. Even Tom noticed the change in her, but he put it down to the fact that I'd forbidden her to meet him after work in future, insisted she come straight home from school each day. He never disagreed with me before Linda, and when she protested to him he said: 'You must do as your mother says,' but in her absence he showed his impatience with me.

'Why shouldn't the kid come and meet me if she wants to? You've no idea the kick it gives me to see her standing there.'

'I'm not going to have her wandering the streets at dusk.'

'You're being absurdly fussy. I can't understand you. Just because on one evening she stayed out longer than usual you've treated her like a prisoner ever since.'

I tried to tell him about the man Tommy Renton said Linda had followed that day after school, but he shrugged his shoulders and said:

'Children will say anything. Linda wouldn't do anything so darned silly as to follow a man in the street, though one day I've no doubt the men will begin to follow her. She's going to be a beauty one day, our Linda.'

'Do you think so?'

My maternal pride was touched. I had never thought of Linda as pretty. She wasn't, in the conventional sense. But I saw now that she had a special charm. There was an elfin quality about her pointed face and dark eyes, an air of mystery that would one day no doubt be labelled 'glamour'. If Linda was going to be a beauty, that was all the more reason why I must keep an eye on her during her growing years.

Weeks passed without further incident. Linda arrived home from school punctually, ate her meal, read her comics, then went to bed early. Her air of tension did not diminish and she behaved to me as if I were a stranger, but she was safe at home and that had to be enough for me.

Then I received a letter from Miss Abbot, Linda's head mistress. It said:

I have been rather disturbed about Linda lately and would be most grateful if you or your husband could spare time to come and see me. I would very much like to have a talk with you.

I showed the letter to Tom. He frowned.

'Wonder what the little monkey's been up to?' he said. 'Will you go, or shall I?'

It was difficult for Tom to get off work during the day so I went.

Miss Abbot was a small, thin woman, frumpily dressed, with a flashing smile and a mass of curly, greying hair. She gave the impression of great kindness and vitality, and I had always felt I could trust her, although my contacts with her so far had been little more than a handshake at school prize-givings.

'I'll come straight to the point,' she said. 'Linda's work has gone off badly. Last term she was top of her class. She's a highly intelligent child and the staff were pleased with her. Lately, however, I've received adverse reports about her. She's taking no trouble over her work at all. She won't put her mind to it. My staff tell me she dreams in class, stares out of the window, and when she's told to do something she starts to do it, then drifts off into a reverie again. She's not impertinent or disobedient—it's just that she doesn't seem to be with us any more. Has she been behaving as usual at home?'

'She's been rather quiet lately,' I admitted.

'It's more than that. She's got something on her mind. I hope you don't mind my asking you this, but are you and your husband—er—do you—?'

'My husband and I are very happy together,' I said, 'and we both love Linda very much.'

She looked embarrassed and said: 'I have to ask these things. The children are my first concern, you see. I had one case in which a child's work went to pieces completely and it turned out that her parents had vicious quarrels every night and the child was breaking under the strain.'

'I can promise you there's nothing like that at our home, Miss Abbot.'

'Then what's the matter with Linda? Have you no idea at all?'

I decided to tell her about the street musician. It sounded a feeble little story, so few facts, so much that might be attributed to my own imagination, but she listened attentively.

When I had finished, she said: 'So ever since the evening when Linda followed this man in the street, she's been acting

differently at home. And it's since that date that we've noticed a change in her work and manner at school. It's a clue. Our only clue.'

'Miss Abbot, do you think—this may sound crazy and I wouldn't dare suggest it to my husband—but do you think perhaps she's fallen in love with this man, whoever he is? A sort of schoolgirl crush. As she hasn't seen him lately, perhaps she's pining for him. I know it sounds odd to say that about a child of twelve, but is it possible?'

'It's perfectly possible. Children get crushes on all sorts of people—film stars, boxers, older children, even teachers sometimes, although that must seem incredible to adults,' and she gave me her quick smile.

'Not at all,' I replied, laughing. 'I remember having a violent pash on my games mistress when I was at school. I'd have gone through fire and water for her. I've never felt quite the same about anyone since.'

'Your "in love" theory is a possible one,' she said. 'I had considered it myself. If it's that, she'll get over it. Win her confidence if you can. Perhaps if she could talk about it, this thing that's taking up her thoughts at the moment, she might feel released and we'd all get back the Linda we knew.'

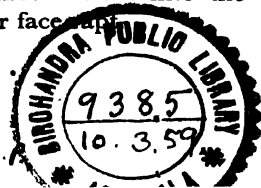
'I'm so glad you asked to see me,' I said. 'I don't feel quite so alone in this business now.'

I rose to go. We shook hands and she said:

'I'm always here if you need me. I'll keep my eyes open at this end and you must let me know if I can help in any way. That child needs help at the moment and we've got to find a way to reach her.'

The bell for end of school rang while I was with Miss Abbot, and I hurried home, not liking the idea of Linda's returning to an empty house.

Dusk had fallen and as I entered the dim hall I thought at first Linda wasn't home, as there were no lights on. Then I saw with relief that her coat was on the stand. I went into the living-room. Linda was by the window, her face



'What are you listening to, Linda?' I said quietly.

She jumped violently. As she turned to me I saw that her face was haggard, almost old. She had gone thinner during the past weeks and there were dark shadows under her eyes. The physical change had been so gradual that I, seeing her every day, had hardly noticed it. Now I saw her with new eyes. The child looked as if she didn't sleep, and she looked far more than her twelve years.

'What are you listening to, darling?' I said gently.

'Nothing.' Her voice was light and hard.

'Why are you in the dark?'

'I like the dark.'

'You're leaving me in the dark too, Linda, and I *don't* like it. Can't you tell me what's the matter?'

'Nothing's the matter.'

'You always used to tell me things. Don't you trust me any more? Linda, if you're in any trouble, if you're unhappy, I'd do anything in my power to help you. That's what mothers are for.'

'You've been to the school, haven't you?'

'Yes. How did you know?'

'One of the girls saw you.'

'Miss Abbot asked to see me.' I sounded as if I were making excuses, Linda the accuser. 'She's worried about you. She says your work's deteriorated.'

'As if that mattered!' Linda's face was scornful. 'How stupid teachers are!'

'You used to like Miss Abbot very much. She's a good and clever woman. You won't meet many of her sort.'

Linda shrugged her shoulders.

'I can't understand you,' I said despairingly.

'You never have,' she said, and her eyes and lips were so strange that it didn't look like my own daughter speaking to me.

'Linda, have you ever seen that man again?'

'What man?' Her face was blank.

'The one who played the violin.'

'I don't remember——' She stopped abruptly and turned to

the window, as if at last hearing the sound she had been listening for before. A queer little smile twisted her lips. She looked—enchanted. Then she deliberately wiped all expression from her face and moved across the room. She switched on the light.

‘What about tea?’ she said.

Without another word I went to the kitchen to prepare food.

Linda had finished her tea when Tom came in, and I said to her: ‘Early to bed for you tonight. You look washed out.’

‘All right.’ She glided out of the room shadow-like. How different from the old days when getting Linda to bed was a nightly battle. Now she made no fuss about going early, sometimes even went without being asked, yet she always looked tired. A dreadful, absurd suspicion crossed my mind, but I brushed it aside as Tom asked:

‘What did Miss Abbot want?’

I told him briefly what the head mistress had said about Linda’s work. Tom looked concerned, but not unnerved.

‘I suppose it’s only to be expected,’ he said. ‘Linda’s at the age for eccentricities. She’s turning from a child into a woman. She’ll settle down again in time.’

‘Is that all you can say?’

‘What more is there? She’s been exceptionally bright for years, always top of the class and so forth, and now she’s slipping. Maybe she overworked and it’s taking its toll of her. Maybe the physical changes that are taking place in her temporarily rob her of the power to concentrate. I don’t know much about these things, but I’m sure a psychologist could tell you that it’s not unusual for a very bright child apparently to lose ground for a while.’

‘I don’t know how you can be so obtuse,’ I flared. ‘You sit there munching steak and chips while your child is changing before your very eyes.’

‘No need for me to starve because Linda’s reached that awkward stage known as adolescence,’ he said calmly.

‘Do you think if it had been no more than that Miss Abbot would have sent for me?’

'She might. These spinster schoolma'ams—they're physically frustrated—must be—and I'll bet their minds are far more twisted than the minds of any of the kids they teach. A teacher thinks there's something odd about a child who loses interest in her work, instead of blaming the tedium of the work. That's a typical teacher's attitude.'

'Linda's indifference to school work dates from the time she followed that violinist in the street,' I said.

That was my trump card.

Tom looked at me as if I really were a hopeless case and said: 'For goodness' sake don't start that damned silly business again. I suppose it hasn't crossed your mind that it might be your attitude that's upsetting Linda. You begin to act like a gaoler instead of a mother—the child mustn't do this and mustn't do that. Where's she been? Who's she been talking to? What's she thinking? I wonder Linda stands up to it as well as she does. You're the one who's changing, my dear, much more than Linda.'

'You're blind!' I cried.

'You're hysterical. You're making our home life a misery with this business. I suppose Miss Abbot never thought to ask what Linda's home was like, how her mother treated her.'

I felt quite sick with pain that he could suggest such a thing, then remembered Miss Abbot's questions: 'You and your husband—are you——?'

Could it possibly be that my imaginings had caused all this unhappiness? Was Linda the normal one, I the abnormal one?

'No!' I shouted. 'I'm not going crazy. I'm not imagining things. If you won't help me I shall solve this mystery myself! I'll track down every street musician in this district until I find the one who's breaking Linda's heart and spoiling her sleep.' I began to cry, covering my face with my hands.

Tom didn't move at first, then he came over to me. His hand touched my cheek gently. 'Pull yourself together, love. I think it would be a good idea if you saw that doctor, you know. I don't like to see you in such a state about nothing.' His hand, so warm,

so secure, so easy to grasp and rely on. I shook it away. False security.

'We won't discuss it any more,' I said.

For then I knew I was alone.

I had never rejected Tom before. He was hurt and angry. His voice was cold as he said:

'I'm going along to the pub for a beer and a game of darts. It'll be a change to get some normal, cheerful company.' He slammed the door as he went.

I sat alone by the fire, listening. I didn't know what I was listening for, but my ears were always on the alert nowadays. Listening. Listening.

Then I remembered my suspicion of a few hours ago. It was nearly eleven o'clock as, with rapidly beating heart, I crept upstairs to Linda's room and opened the door. A shaft of moonlight fell across her bed, making the pillow glimmer mysteriously.

But there was no dark head on the pillow.

The bed was empty.

4

WITHOUT bothering to put on a coat, although it was bitterly cold, I ran out into the moonlight, along the twisting streets, sharply moon-shadowed, to the pub in the High Street.

I thrust open the door and stood blinking in the glare of light. The warm, stuffy, beer-laden atmosphere wrapped itself round me like a sickening cloak. I had often been to this pub with Tom, laughed and drunk with him, talked to everybody, been happy and sociable, but now the place appeared hideous to me. The coloured bottles on the shelves behind the bar counter were winking evil eyes, the people's talking faces looked mean and distorted, the barmaid was brassy with her over-fair hair, over-painted face and cheeky expression. The radio was playing loud dance music and people were shouting to be heard above it.

In one corner a group of men, flushed with beer-drinking, blurred with tobacco smoke, clustered round the dart-board. A cheer went up as someone got 'double top'. The winner was grinning happily and saying:

'I'll treat everyone to a pint to celebrate!'

It was Tom. He was laughing and joking in the warmth and light, while Linda . . .

'Tom!' I called. 'Tom!' I pushed my way towards him. Someone spilt beer on my dress. At last I reached him and caught his arm.

'Tom, come with me.'

His hot, merry face turned towards me. I must have looked queer, for he immediately sobered and said:

'What's happened?'

'Linda's gone.'

'Gone?'

'I went to her bedroom to see if she was all right. She's not there.'

'But wasn't she somewhere else in the house? Perhaps she sneaked down to the kitchen for a biscuit. Did you look everywhere?'

'No, but——'

'You mean you just dashed out of the house because the kid wasn't in bed?'

'Yes, but I'm sure she's not in the house.'

'Come on, Tom,' called one of the men. 'You promised us a round.'

'Sorry, chaps. I've got to go,' Tom said. 'Here's the cash for it. Better hurry up or it'll be "time".'

We hurried out of the pub together. The cold struck me like a knife-gash. Tom put his arm round me and said: 'You'll freeze in this wind. Why didn't you put on a coat?'

'I came straight to find you. Tom, we must look for her. Shall we tell the police?'

'We'll make sure she's missing first,' he said. 'Here, put my

coat on. 'I can't have you out in this weather with practically nothing on.'

He began to struggle out of his overcoat.

'Please don't stop to do that, Tom. It doesn't matter about my being cold.'

'Nonsense,' he said. 'It won't help matters if you catch pneumonia.' He insisted on stopping and putting his big overcoat round me. It trailed far below my knees and my hands felt helpless, trapped in the sleeves. I must have looked a ludicrous figure, but the warmth was exquisite.

'There, you're going nice and pink already,' he said.

'Tom, hurry!'

At last we reached the house. The front door was still open, just as I had left it. The lights were on in the living-room. It was very quiet.

'Her coat's still there,' said Tom. 'I don't think she's gone out at all. Was the coat there when you left the house?'

'I didn't notice. Oh, God, surely she wouldn't have gone out without her coat!'

'Not Linda. She's not nuts like her mother,' he said, squeezing my hand. But he looked anxious for all his comforting words, and his voice was sharp as he called:

'Linda! Where are you?'

He ran up the stairs to her room. I followed.

'It's no good looking there,' I said.

I was just behind him as he opened her door and switched on the light.

A small, tousled head rose from the pillow. A sleepy voice said:

'Did you call me? What's the matter?'

Tom stood quite still, then said: 'You gave your mother a fright, old lady. Where have you been?'

'I've not been anywhere. Has something happened?'

'No, love, it's all right. Go to sleep again.' Tom went over to her, kissed her gently, and she lay down again. 'Sweet dreams,' he said.

'Good night, Dad.'

'Good night, my darling.'

He turned off the light and returned to me on the landing. I was so relieved that my legs wouldn't support me any longer. I sat on the top stair and buried my face in my hands. Tom helped me to my feet and down the stairs.

'She's been there all the time,' he said. 'You imagined it all.'

'She wasn't in bed when I looked. I swear it.'

'Let's not worry any more. I'm going to heat you some milk, then we'll go to bed.'

'Don't humour me, Tom. I know what I saw. Believe me, I wouldn't lie about a thing like this.'

'I know you wouldn't lie. You were just mistaken.'

It was no good trying to convince him.

'I'm sorry if I was cross with you before I went out,' continued Tom. 'I didn't mean to upset you, but you're such an old worrier it gets on my nerves sometimes.'

Long after Tom was asleep that night I lay wide-eyed, watching a shaft of moonlight make its slow progress across the floor. I wondered if there were moon-dials for telling the time as well as sun-dials. Then I began to tremble in the warm bed.

'Oh, God help me!' I prayed silently. Then I thought with self-contempt that I only turned to God in times of trouble. I didn't even believe in Him at any other time. But now there was no one else.

Perhaps He gave me strength. Or perhaps, more likely, the very fact that I deluded myself that there was such a thing as heavenly help calmed me. I began to think more clearly. Tomorrow I would make inquiries about street violinists in these parts. There couldn't be so very many of them. I'd ask at the pub. All the gossip of the neighbourhood went on there, and often street vendors and entertainers went in there for beer and a snack.

Having made up my mind to do something definite, I slept.

Next morning, before Tom came down, I said to Linda: 'Where *did* you go last night? I looked in your room and you weren't there.'

'I must have been in the lav,' she said. 'If I'd known you wanted me I'd have called out. I can't tell you *everywhere* where I go, all the time; even though I know you'd like me to.'

'Oh, Linda—darling . . . ' I couldn't bear her to look at me so coldly. I wanted to take her in my arms, thin and pale and haunted as she looked. I touched her hair gently. It seemed thin and straggly. For a second she pressed her head hard against my hand and into her eyes came an expression of appeal, a little lost look. Then she broke away from me and went to her place at the breakfast table. She gave herself a helping of cereal and pretended to eat it, but she didn't make much headway.

When she and Tom had both left the house I made my way to the pub. I wanted to get there as soon as it opened so I could talk to the barmaid in comparative privacy.

The bar looked very different in the morning, dim and dusty, dismal and dilapidated. One or two of the small tables were taken by stout women with shopping baskets. It always surprised me how some housewives came in here for a mid-morning beer or sherry as naturally as I would slip into a milk bar for morning coffee. The barmaid, looking older and even more painted in the ruthless daylight, lounged wearily against the counter.

'A sherry, please,' I said, and sat on the bar stool.

'Here you are, dear.' I paid her, then said:

'How quiet it is here in the day-time compared with the evenings.'

'Thank heaven,' she said. 'I'd go mad if the evenings went on all day, if you get my meaning.'

'You don't put the radio on in the morning.'

'No. Boss's mean. Says it's a waste of "juice" when there are only a few customers.'

'Don't the street musicians ever come in and give you a tune?'

'Not likely,' she said. 'Sometimes they come in for a beer, but they don't work while they're having it.'

'Any violinists among them?'

'Not since Marcus used to come in here. He was clever with his fiddle, Marcus was. Spoilt the beat for any other fiddler. Anyway,

they said he had his own methods of keeping other fiddlers off his streets. He called them *his* streets. Possessive he was. Might have been a sort of Hitler if he'd had the chance, I wouldn't wonder. You must have seen him if you live in these parts. Where do you live?"

'In Canver Row.'

'Oh, that's just off his beat, but you might have seen him in the High Street.'

Then I did remember. One evening some weeks ago I had been returning from seeing a friend. I'd heard music from a violin and thought how unexpectedly beautiful it was. Supposing at first that the sound came from a radio, I'd been surprised to find that the performer was a street musician. He was standing under a street lamp, a very tall, thin man, with his shadow oddly foreshortened at his feet. I noticed this giant-with-the-shadow-of-a-dwarf effect and thought how deceptive shadows were, for my own shadow, backward cast as I walked towards him, was taller and thinner than the tallest man.

The violinist's music filled my ears as I passed him, and made me shiver with ecstasy. I looked quickly at his face, intent over the violin. It was white, pointed, strange, with deep-set dark eyes. His hair was smooth and black, longer than the current fashion. I thought for a moment that I must have seen him before—the face was familiar. It seemed strange that he should be playing in the gathering darkness on a cool evening, for few people were about.

His wide-brimmed black hat, so battered that it was surely never worn, lay at his feet. His clothes were ragged, frayed at the edges. There was a great tear in his jacket. I tossed a penny into the hat. He smiled at me. A smile of such radiance and charm that my heart gave a leap of excitement—the sort of heart-stifling leap that a girl feels at a dance when the stranger she is most attracted to asks her to dance. As I walked on, the music in my ears, my cheeks were hot.

'Yes,' I murmured. 'I remember. I think I must have seen Marcus one evening.' I described him. The barmaid nodded.

"That's him all right. He had no money, nothing but what he stood up in and his fiddle, but if he wanted you to you'd have followed him to the ends of the earth. No girl could resist him if he beckoned to her, in spite of the horrible stories that went round about him."

"Horrible stories?"

"They said he made girls fall in love with him, was so wonderful to them at first that they worshipped him completely, then he tortured them: I don't mean the rack and thumbscrew sort of thing, but you know the sort of torture a man can inflict on a woman who loves him. And the sort of things a man and a woman can do together that break all the laws of decency. He had to have someone to play with, and his idea of playing was being cruel for cruelty's sake. I knew a girl who went with him for a while. She killed herself in the end. There were others I heard about."

"If you knew all that about him, didn't you hate him? Didn't you want to throw him out whenever he came here?"

"No," said the girl, half ashamed, half defiant. "I didn't feel like that. He could make you feel the way he wanted you to feel."

"Did he—have any special attraction for children?" I asked.

"Funny you should say that. Yes, he did. I've seen children stop to listen to him and cry when their mothers dragged them away. Sometimes kids followed him through the streets. Sometimes he talked to them, gathered them in a circle round him and whispered. He stopped when any adult came near. They'd never say afterwards what he told them. They seemed scared of him, yet fascinated by him. Like everyone else. Once he talked to me about the kids. He said he wished he could find a "perfect daughter", that he was looking for her among all the children in the streets, and when he found her he'd want her to come with him, wherever he went. He said he'd take her away and teach her everything he knew."

"Everything he knew," I murmured, thinking of the darkness in this strange man's mind, visualizing the horrors of his complete knowledge. "Everything evil!"

'I suppose so,' said the girl. 'But he had a way with him.'

'I'm afraid for my own daughter,' I said frankly. 'I think perhaps, from what you've told me, that he may be influencing her in some way. She's only twelve. So will you help me? Will you tell me where I can find this man?'

She flung back her blonde head and laughed aloud, the hearty barmaid's laugh that she usually saved for her male customers in the evening.

'In a ~~very~~ hot place, I should think,' she said. 'Marcus ~~was~~ killed six weeks ago. He was knocked down by a car in the street and died instantly.'

5

THE relief was exquisite. I began to laugh.

'I must have ~~and~~ her sherry to celebrate,' I said. 'The more you told me about this Marcus, the more ~~scared~~ I grew, and when you said he was looking for a "perfect daughter", and I thought of my own little girl following a violinist in the street, ~~even~~ going out at night to him, I nearly died of fright.'

'Don't blame you,' said the girl. 'No, whoever your kid's got a crush on, it can't be Marcus. How old did you say she was?'

'Twelve.'

'Well, I can't think of any street musicians in these parts who'd attract a child of twelve. They're all scruffy and old, and if there are any fiddlers around since Marcus died I don't know of them. There's a blind man with an accordion, an old soldiers' brass band, a couple of singers—chronic they are—and an old Italian with a monkey and a barrel-organ. Could it be him? He's quite a favourite with the kiddies. Anyway, I don't think you need worry. Did you say your youngster slipped out at night?'

'I'm almost sure she has been doing. I only found out yesterday evening.'

'Then take it from me she's probably meeting some silly boy

and they both deserve a good spanking. I remember slipping out for a bit of spogging when I was thirteen and Dad gave me the hiding of my life when he found out. I was so indignant. Couldn't think what all the fuss was about. Kids are innocent at that age; however much they know in theory about life and sex and so forth it doesn't really mean anything to them. It's not quite real. We thought our kisses were the height of daring, I remember—but I can feel the sting of my dad's belt now when I think of it, and I never went out at night again without his permission. That wasn't until I was sixteen.'

'Linda—that's my daughter—is very unsophisticated. She's not a bit interested in boys.'

'Children are secretive. You never know what they're really interested in. Isn't there some boy she's friendly with?'

In a flash I thought of Tommy Renton. He was younger than Linda, but they'd always got on very well. I remembered Tommy's saying that Linda had gone off with a man one day after school. Could it be he'd made that up to defend himself? Perhaps when Linda listened at the window it was to hear a special whistle from Tommy. Were she and Tommy childish in love, dreaming of getting married one day, so that everything they did at school and at home seemed 'kid stuff'? That would explain the change in Linda—her boredom with lessons, her superciliousness at home, her strangely adult look. It would have to be dealt with. Romeo and Juliet in Canver Row would set quite a problem, but how much happier a problem than if she'd fallen for some dreadful man like this Marcus!

I left that pub feeling better than I'd felt for weeks, and when I saw Tommy himself playing with a ball in the street outside my house I called:

'Hello, you monkey, why aren't you at school?'

'I've got a cold,' he said.

'Then oughtn't you to look after it indoors?'

He grinned and said: 'It felt well enough to come out for a walk.'

I laughed, liking Tommy, as I always had done. But he

mustn't be allowed to get away with too much, so I said rather severely: "I want to speak to you, my lad. Come inside with me, will you?"

Immediately he shrank back.

"What do you want to see me about?"

"Come in and I'll tell you."

"If it's about Linda I'm not going to tell you anything, because I promised her."

"I don't want you to break promises, but I need your help, Tommy."

He came into the kitchen and hovered at the door. His thin, gangly legs made him look very young and defenceless, much younger than Linda. He was only a *little* boy. The very idea of a flirtation in connection with him was absurd, yet he was hiding something. He looked guilty.

"Have you been seeing a lot of Linda lately?" I said.

"Not much."

"But more than you used to?"

"No, much less. She says now that I'm only a kid."

"Tommy, do you ever go out at night?"

"Not often. Sometimes to the pictures when we all go, but usually Mum makes me go to bed early."

"You don't ever get up again and go out?"

He gave me a look of genuine astonishment.

"Cripes, no!" he said. "What'd I do a daft thing like that for?"

"You're telling me the truth, aren't you, Tommy?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die," he said. "Why did you ask?"

"I wondered. I'm a bit worried about Linda. You're fond of her, aren't you?"

"I'd do anything for Linda," he said. "Anything."

"Then is there anything you think I ought to know? Tommy, please help me if you can. Has she got a—a boy friend?"

He fidgeted, stared down at his feet, then said: "No."

"Has she any friend that her father and I don't know about?"

"I don't know."

"You *do* know. You *must* tell me."

Tommy had gone so pale that his freckles stood out starkly, but he said nothing.

Then his mother's voice called from outside: 'Tommy! Tommy!'

'That's Mum. I must go.' He dived for the kitchen door and fled as if I were pursuing him.

I'd got nothing out of him, but I was sure of one thing. It wasn't Tommy Renton who crept out at night to meet my daughter, but Tommy knew who it was and, loving Linda as he did, he had promised he wouldn't tell a soul. I couldn't make trouble for him for keeping his promise.

The only thing for me to do was wait until Linda went out at night again and follow her.

My husband was doing overtime at the factory that night and wouldn't be home until late. Linda and I had a quiet, strained evening, then she went to bed.

I stayed in the living-room, the door slightly ajar, my ears on the alert. There was no sound from upstairs. At eleven o'clock I crept up and looked into Linda's room. She was safely in bed, apparently asleep. I went to the kitchen to make a cup of tea. While I waited for the water to boil I stepped outside the back door into the yard. Another moonlight night. Even the dustbin, etched with silver, looked beautiful on such a night. The houses were grave and lovely. The moon herself hung miraculously over us all, shedding her enchantment. I felt a touch of sheer delight at being alive on such a night.

And then I heard it.

Music. Faint. Magical. The soft notes of a violin. I went icy cold. For a moment I couldn't move. Then I rushed back to the house, just in time to see, from the living-room window, a small figure streak soundlessly down the moonlit path into the street. There hovered a tall, dark shadow. I saw the glimmer of an eye in the moonlight, the sheen of a violin, and the figure vanished.

'Linda, come back!' I called. I was out of the door, down the path, in the street. Linda was nowhere to be seen.

'Linda! Linda!'

I ran down the street calling her name, looking in every doorway, starting at every shadow. My own shadow shrank and grew, shrank and grew, as I passed the street lamps, like a separate creature running alongside me.

'Linda, come back!'

Lights flicked on in windows.

'Cut the row there,' a man's gruff voice shouted.

I went on through the twisting streets, breathless now, half sobbing. I turned the corner of a vast warehouse that overlooked the canal——

And I saw her.

She was standing alone on the brink of the canal, looking down into the water. Then she glanced up at the moon. Her face by moonlight was strange, beautiful, unchildlike. It sounds fantastic to say one is afraid of one's daughter, but I was afraid of Linda at that moment. She seemed like a creature from another world.

Afraid for her as well as of her, I dared not call out. If I did she might be startled and fall into the water. Now she turned her head sideways and looked up slightly, as if into the face of someone tall standing over her.

She said clearly: 'No, I'm not afraid. It's just that it looks so cold and dark.'

Then she jumped.

My own loud scream drowned the splash that her body made as it hit the water. I went on screaming as I ran to the edge of the canal and plunged into the cold blackness. She was struggling there, thrashing about with her arms and legs. She couldn't swim. I could only swim a little and knew nothing of life-saving, but I managed to grab her and concentrated entirely on keeping her head above water. I saw naked terror in her dark eyes. Her hands, like strong wet ice, clung and slipped, grasped and fought. We seemed to struggle there in eternity, but it probably wasn't for more than a few minutes. A voice called: 'Hang on there. We're coming.'

Two splashes in the water. Quick bodies moving towards us.

Strong arms about us. At last they feel beneath my feet of slippery steps that led up from the canal!

Linda was unconscious. Small, soaked, like a limp doll in the arms of the big man who had saved her, she looked lifeless.

'Is she—is she . . . ?' I gasped to him.

He made no reply but ran up the steps, put the child on the ground and gave her artificial respiration until he must have been exhausted.

At last he moved away and said to me: 'She'll be all right. Better let the hospital see her now.'

By that time an ambulance had arrived. Linda and I were wrapped in blankets and a nurse sat with us as the ambulance clanged its way through the streets to the hospital. Linda was put to bed in the children's ward. I told them I was all right, except that I couldn't stop shaking, but they insisted on putting me to bed with two hot-water bottles. They gave me a sleeping draught. The sister promised to telephone my husband at work. I clung to her hand and said:

'Tell them to watch Linda. Don't let her run away!'

'She won't even be able to walk at the moment, let alone run,' said the sister kindly. 'Now, you must sleep. You can tell us all about it in the morning. She's safe, and you're safe. We'll look after you both.'

'I know you,' I said hazily. 'I know your face. Oh, yes—you looked after me when—when . . .'

Warm darkness closed over me and I slept.

6

THE sun was shining when I woke, and Tom was there. His face was weary and unshaven, his eyes were heavy from lack of sleep.

'Hello, love,' he said, and tried to smile.

'Oh, Tom! How wonderful to wake up and find you here! How's Linda?'

'Not too good at the moment, they say, but she'll be O.K. She needs rest. Oh, I had such a fright when I got that phone call last night. I thought you were both dying. This has been the worst night of my life—except for one other.'

'What was the other?' I lay back, smiling up at him, feeling warm, relaxed and absurdly irresponsible. Linda was safe. Tom was here. We were together, the curtains pulled round us, and sunlight filtering through the window behind my bed. For the moment nothing could touch us. The real, dangerous world seemed far away.

'The other time was the night Linda arrived in this very hospital. Remember?'

'I'm not likely to forget,' I grimaced. 'Although I realize that it's the men who suffer most on these occasions, of course? And I gave him a mischievous look.

'Oh, darling,' he said, 'it's good to see you smile again. You've been looking so grim lately.'

'Grim things have been happening,' I said.

'Do you feel up to telling me just what happened last night? All I could get from the hospital was that you and Linda were brought out of the canal half drowned.'

'If it hadn't been for those two men we would have been.'

'I saw them and thanked them—tangibly,' he said.

'Oh, Tom, I'm so glad you did that. They were wonderful.'

'But what were you and Linda doing by the canal at that time of night?'

I told him what had happened, concluding with: 'Linda jumped in. She tried to kill herself.'

'I can't believe it,' he whispered.

'There's no shadow of doubt. Just before she jumped, she said: "No, I'm not afraid. It's just that it looks so cold and dark."'

'But who was she speaking to?'

'There was no one there.'

'It's incredible. Why should Linda want to kill herself? We didn't make her unhappy, did we? We loved her and looked

after her. 'What sort of trouble was she in that she couldn't tell us about?'

'I've known for some time that something was badly wrong. Strange things have happened. Tom, I heard the music.'

'Music?'

'The violin. Just before she left the house.'

'You probably imagined that,' he said.

The curtain round my bed was drawn aside and the sister appeared.

'Time's up,' she said. 'Your wife must have her lunch now.'

'When shall I be able to go home, sister?' I asked.

'We'll keep you here tonight, then you can go tomorrow morning if you feel up to it.'

'May I see Linda?'

'Not, at the moment, my dear. She must be kept quiet.'

'Will she be able to come home tomorrow?'

'Oh, no. She's an ill little girl at the moment, but don't worry. We're looking after her.' She was a little too brisk and bright for my liking. It frightened me. I clung to Tom and kissed him.

'I'll come this evening in visiting hours,' he said.

'Darling, how will you manage for food?'

'Oh, boil myself an egg or something.'

'No, Tom, you must have a proper meal.'

'All right, I'll treat myself to a slap-up meal at a café if that'll make you happier.'

'Yes, please do that.'

'See you tonight,' he said.

I had my lunch, then slept for most of the afternoon. Cups of tea and pieces of cake were brought round on a trolley at tea-time and I was feeling a lot better. I'd have been really happy if I hadn't been so worried about Linda. If I was so much better already, why wasn't she? Yet each time I asked the sister she said:

'There's no change. You mustn't worry.'

After tea, when the sister had been round to see the patients, she returned to my bed. To my surprise she pulled the curtains

round us and sat on the chair used by visitors. For a sickening moment I thought she had bad news for me.

'What's happened? Linda . . .'

'It's not that,' she said. 'It's something quite different. Something that's been weighing on my mind for years. Now I've just got to tell you.'

'Tell me what?'

'You recognized me last night, didn't you?'

'Yes. You were the nurse on duty in my ward when Linda was born. You weren't a sister then.'

'No, I was just a nurse. An ambitious nurse. I wanted to get on. I wanted to be a matron one day.'

'I expect you will be. You've done very well,' I said, mystified by her behaviour.

'It depends on you,' she said. Then I saw how strained and anxious she was looking. She had a strong face, plain with large features. She was the sort of woman men would not find physically attractive, but whom women would always like and trust.

'Depends on me?' I repeated. 'How on earth can your career here depend on me?'

'Your husband's told me a little about Linda, the trouble you've been having. That's why I felt I must tell you what I hoped would remain a secret. Do you remember the girl in the next bed to you when you were in the maternity ward?'

'Very well. I remember all that time vividly. I had a corner bed. In the next one was a very pretty girl with red hair. Her name was Mrs. Greer, Lucille Greer. I was sorry for her because her husband never came to see her. He was away on business, she said. I can still see her in my mind's eye—vivid, lively, so frightened just before her baby was born, and so happy afterwards. Our children were born on the same night and we were both scared stiff together. Our babies were very alike. I know all babies are alike in a way, but ours really were like two peas in a pod.'

'So alike you wouldn't know the difference,' said the sister. 'One night, when you and Mrs. Greer had fed your babies, I

took the two of them away from you, took their labels off for a minute to give them a little wash, and as I washed them my thoughts wandered. I turned to put the labels on again, and I wasn't sure dead certain which was which. I didn't dare confess to the ward sister. I'd have been in disgrace if I had—the blackest of black marks for such a mistake. So I took a chance. A fifty-fifty chance that you and Mrs. Greer would get your own babies.'

The facts were so fantastic that I couldn't take them in for a minute. For twelve years Linda had been my child, and now, out of the blue, this woman had the nerve to tell me she might be someone else's!

'Linda's mine. I know she is,' I said desperately. 'Oh, why did you have to tell me?'

'Partly because there's evidently something about Linda that neither you nor your husband quite understands. But mostly, I suppose, to clear my own conscience. This case has haunted me for years. I feel I can't go on with my profession without giving you a chance to—to break me, if you wish. You could. A word from you. Nurse's negligence.'

'I shall tell no one,' I said. 'It's old history. Supposing by some remote chance Mrs. Greer and I got the wrong children. The child I've brought up and loved is *my* child. Mine in all the senses that matter. I'm going to forget what you told me. I shan't even tell my husband. You were very brave to tell me.'

'I don't know how to say I'm sorry. It was such a terrible thing to do. An unforgivable thing.'

'Put against it all the good you've done, the kindness you've shown, the people you've saved. Put against it the fact that you've been three times as careful about everything since. Isn't that true?'

She nodded.

'Then let's forget it. I love Linda. She's my daughter. Save her life for me. Make her well. All that matters to me is that Linda shall be alive and well and happy. Linda, as a person, as *herself*. Now leave me, please. I'm so tired.'

Tired. I had never felt so tired before. All my false well-being

of the morning and early afternoon had vanished. I felt that if I closed my eyes again I would die from sheer exhaustion. But I meant every word I had said to the sister. I had looked after Linda for twelve years. Therefore she was mine.

But my mind would not let me rest, for all my determination not to think of what I had been told. I remembered so many things. Casual remarks. 'Linda isn't like you or your husband, is she?' 'No, she isn't like any of our relatives either. She's special. Individual.' Then Linda's own words recently; 'I don't understand you,' I had said. She replied: 'You never have.' Time and time again, in spite of my love for her, I had felt that my daughter was a stranger to me. I wondered about the other little girl, the one Lucille Greer had taken home as her own. Perhaps she was really mine. That thought did not hurt me. Lucille would be a sweet mother. She would make any child happy. Did the child look like me? Or like Tom? My thoughts whirled crazily, endlessly. They turned into half dreams as I lay, not asleep, not awake. Scenes from the past. Linda's strange, elfin little face. Linda, a loved stranger in the house. Linda . . . Linda . . .

When visiting hour came I struggled with powder and lipstick to make myself presentable for Tom. He was looking worried.

'I've seen Linda,' he said. 'She's pretty ill.'

'But they wouldn't let me see her.'

'It seems she kept asking for her father. She's delirious. She says "Father, Father, don't go away—I'm coming." But when I came in she didn't recognize me. And it's odd she should say "Father".' She always calls me "Dad". I can't understand why she doesn't get better. I don't think the doctor can either. He says it's the effects of nervous shock, but I'm sure he's only guessing. He doesn't really know.'

'We must pray for her,' I said. 'There's nothing else left. Perhaps prayer is the answer. It's all we can do for Linda at the moment. Pray for her tonight, Tom. I'll pray too. Perhaps we can drive the evil forces away from her.'

'You mustn't get excited,' he said, concerned about me now with my talk of prayer and evil forces. 'I want you home tomorrow.'

'I'll be home tomorrow, darling. Did you have a good meal as you promised?'

'I did.'

'Oh, Tom!' He hugged me close and we sat like that in silence until the visiting hour ended and he had to go.

Before the sleeping drug took effect on me that night I heard an odd fragment of conversation between two nurses. One said: 'I've been on duty in the children's ward. I've never known them so restless. One little monkey insists there's a man in the ward—a long thin man with something on his shoulder', he said. Another said she could hear music and didn't want to sleep "because it's so pretty". Honestly, those kids will be the death of me. Sometimes they seem to gang up against you and you might as well try to penetrate a stone wall as try to find out what's in their minds.'

'A conspiracy of children,' said the other nurse.

'Yes,' agreed the first one. 'That's just it! A conspiracy of children!'

7

THE next morning they let me see Linda.

Although I had been in the hospital for less than two days I felt curiously lost as I struggled into my clothes again, fumbling with buttons and suspenders as if I'd been an invalid for a long time. When I was dressed, a little nurse from the children's ward came to escort me. She looked young to have so much responsibility, but her blue eyes were clear and honest and her movements were brisk.

'You mustn't go too much by appearances, now,' she said to me. 'Children often look awful when they're ill, but once they're round the corner they suddenly perk up and look as if nothing's ever been the matter with them. In fact they get a bit above themselves. It's not the really sick ones that give trouble in a ward. It's the "getting-betters", bless 'em. Your Linda's going to

be a "getting-better" before long, then I expect she'll lead us a dance.'

She was trying so hard to cheer me that I suspected all was not well with Linda.

I was right.

At first I didn't recognise the little face on the pillow, it was so thin, drawn and flushed. Her eyes, wide open, stared sightlessly. Her breathing was shallow. One arm lay limply on the sheet, the wrist so fragile it looked as if it would break at a touch.

I went down on my knees beside the bed.

'Linda, darling,' I whispered.

She frowned; rubbed her head from side to side on the pillow. I stroked her brow gently. It was burning hot. Her hair was wispy and dry, like shabby black straw, all its beautiful young lustre gone.

'She's miles away, poor mite,' said the nurse. 'She doesn't recognize anyone. not even her father, although she kept asking for him.'

'You know I'll follow you, I'll do anything you say. I can't help myself,' Linda said in her normal voice. I thought she was speaking to me, until I saw her eyes staring beyond me.

'She's rambling,' said the nurse. 'You'd better go home. We'll let you know if there's any change.'

Outside the ward again, I said: 'But what's the matter with her? This can't be the result of her fall into the canal.'

'I think it's a sort of nervous breakdown,' said the nurse. 'But you must talk to Dr. Rivers about that. If you come round at about three this afternoon you can see him.'

'I'll do that.' I felt faint and swimmy now. The long white corridor seemed to heave under my feet as if I were walking on board ship. The very walls lurched and swayed.

'Don't be too upset,' said the little nurse, taking my arm. 'I've seen children look far, far more ill than Linda and they've been all right in the long run. Really!'

'If she were to die . . . ' The terrible words were out. I felt almost better for having spoken them.

The nurse said: 'We don't let our children die.' That silenced me. When we reached the entrance she said: 'Now, I've got to go back. Will you be all right?'

'Quite all right. And thank you so much for everything.'

The world steadied about me now. The ground ceased to rock. For this morning I must be strong and determined. I had work to do.

Within half an hour I was home. It was pleasurable to be back there again. You only realize how much you love your very ordinary home when you've been compulsorily away from it for a while. I took pleasure simply in washing in my own bathroom, doing my hair before my own mirror, using the familiar jars of cream and bowl of powder.

When I was ready to go out again, I rummaged through the writing-table drawer and found my address book. I'd had the book for years. It even contained addresses of school friends whom I would never see again, as far as I knew. I turned to the 'G' section. There it was, Lucille Greer's address. Optimistically we had exchanged addresses in the hospital twelve years ago, but we had never bothered to look each other up.

It took me an hour to reach the house where Lucille lived. It was in a much more pleasant neighbourhood than mine. The houses had gardens instead of yards. The gutters were fairly clear of rubbish. There were even trees in the street. Lucky Lucille! I thought, then felt disloyal to Tom, who had always done his best for me and couldn't be blamed for the fact that we were so hard up.

A flight of stone steps led up to the green-painted front door. The house was apparently divided into three flats. The top bell of the three alongside the door was labelled 'Greer'. I rang it.

Soon I heard light steps on the stairs, then the door opened. At first I hardly recognized Lucille. I remembered her as a mere girl in a hospital bed, her red hair lying luxuriantly on the pillow, her face very young and emotional. Before me stood an elegant woman, red hair flecked with grey built up neatly on top of her head, calm face heavily made up, well-cut suit, sheer stockings.

'Yes?' she said, eyeing me with indifference.

'Lucille, don't you remember me?'

She peered more closely. I remembered then that she was rather short-sighted and too vain to wear glasses. Then her face lit up and for a second I saw the old Lucille of hospital days.

'You!' she said. 'But how wonderful! Do come in!'

'I hope you don't mind my coming like this?'

'Not a bit. I'm delighted. I'm leaving here soon, so it's a good thing you came now and not a few days hence.'

We climbed the stairs together and entered her flat. It was attractively furnished. Plenty of money had been spent on this, I thought, comparing it mentally with my own more humble abode.

One thing surprised me—there were no evidences of either her husband or her daughter, no man's hat or coat on the hall-stand, no large masculine umbrella, no child's books or clothes around. My own living-room was never free from some article of Linda's or Tom's clothing in spite of all my efforts.

'I'll make coffee,' said Lucille, 'then we can have a good old gossip. Whatever made you suddenly decide to come and see me?'

I followed her into the tidy kitchen and watched her make coffee with an elaborate glass funnel and flask, the sort of coffee machine I'd seen in shop windows and never been able to afford.

'I've just been in hospital,' I said. 'The same hospital. That set me thinking about you, wondering how you were getting on. So I looked up your address and here I am.' It sounded a feeble explanation to me, but she took it at its face value.

'Well, it's sweet of you to come. You're better now, are you?'

'Oh, yes, it was nothing much. How's Mary, Lucille?' I asked as we carried the coffee back to her living-room. 'You did call your daughter Mary, didn't you? I know you were going to.'

'Yes, I called her Mary.' She put her coffee-cup down sharply on the table. 'She's twelve now. But of course you know that. Silly of me. She's—she's in America with my sister.'

'In America? But why?'

'There were reasons.'

'And your husband?'

'He's dead.'

'Oh, Lucille, I'm so sorry. How dreadful for you.'

She looked straight at me and said: 'Don't waste any sympathy on me. I'm glad. He made me so unhappy—you can't imagine . . .'

'Don't talk about it if it upsets you.'

'I'd like to tell you. I've bottled it all up inside me for so long that I feel I shall go mad if I don't tell someone. Perhaps if I say it all, bring it out into the light, I'll be able to shed it completely when I go away. You see, I'm going to America in a few weeks' time to join Mary and my sister and brother-in-law. There I shall start again. I shall try to forget that I ever had a husband.'

'Oh, Lucille!' I must have looked shocked, for she said bitterly:

'It's all very well for you to look smug about it. I saw your husband when you were in hospital that time. He looked a good, kind man. I envied you that man. Remember how my husband never came to see me?'

'You said he was away on business.'

'He wasn't. He was right here in London. "My dear," he said to me before I went in, "having this child is your business. When it's born it will be mine; a girl, I hope. At the moment it's yours. I'm not interested in the biological side." The biological side! Then when Mary was born he behaved as if she belonged to him entirely. I was unimportant, a nonentity, simply the female machine that had brought her into being. That went on until she was two, then the change began. He suddenly turned away from the child and told me she wasn't his. He accused me of going with other men, of being unfaithful to him. I couldn't convince him. You see, there was no physical resemblance at all between him and the child, or between the child and me for that matter. At first I thought it was jealousy on my account that made him act the way he did, but it wasn't that. He didn't care about me. He just felt that the child wasn't his own, and he had very much wanted to feel ownership over the child. He began to treat her like an unwelcome cat or dog about the place. He'd reject her little overtures. Once he even kicked her.

'That was the night we had a real fight. I hit him about the face. He knocked me down. Our home life became hell on earth. It was a relief to me when he began to stay out more. I knew he must have other women, but I didn't care. I only stayed with him because of the money—at least, I told myself that was why I stayed. He never left me short of money. He had plenty, and was careless with it. He'd leave whole wads of notes lying around. I never dared inquire how he came to have so much.' •

'What was his work, Lucille?'

'He played first violin in an orchestra. Then he lost his job; had a violent row with the manager and got fired. For a long time he went out every day and I didn't know where he went. For three years I had no idea how he earned his money in the day-time. When I asked him he told me to mind my own business; said that as long as I had financial support that was all I need worry about.

'It was quite by chance that I found out what he was doing. I went into a nearby district one day, a rather poor neighbourhood, and I saw a crowd of people, mostly children, standing at a corner. I heard the notes of a violin. I drew closer.

'The street violinist was Marcus, my husband.'

'Marcus—*your* husband!' I saw Marcus again in my mind's eye, remembered his face had been familiar. Now I knew why. He had a look of Linda. The same shape of face, the deep-set dark eyes, the magic look. But whereas Linda's magic look had been all sweetness, his had been evil.

'You knew Marcus?' asked Lucille.

'I saw him once.'

'And heard about him, no doubt. Later I discovered that his reputation stank in that area. No one knew he really lived in this more elegant part. Nobody knew he was rich. He found being a ragged street musician more profitable than playing in an orchestra, not merely because people are so foolishly generous when their hearts are touched but because in that life he found out things about people.'

'What sort of things?'

'Things people will pay money to have kept secret.'

'Blackmail?'

'Exactly. I made inquiries about my husband and found there was hardly a vice he had not practised, hardly a low, filthy dive in the neighbourhood he had not visited, not a vile thing he didn't know. And that was the man who could make his violin sing so wonderfully that you wanted to fall down and worship before him.

'The children worried me most of all. They'd follow him in the streets. They were his most enthralled audience. When he had played to them and won their hearts he drew them close round him and talked to them. I saw him once with a group of children. Their faces were pale and ecstatic. They listened with every fibre of their beings. When they were asked afterwards what Marcus had told them, none of them said a word. But they had a knowing look in their eyes, a touch of contempt for ordinary people. They formed a conspiracy. I think Marcus told them evil things. I think he tried to twist their minds. When I discovered all that I thanked God he had rejected our daughter. He said he was looking for a "perfect daughter" among the children he knew. Thank God he never found her, as far as I know. I pale to think of what he might have done to a little girl who caught his interest.

'I decided to send Mary away as a precaution. My sister had just married an American and she and her husband offered to take Mary with them. That was three years ago. When Mary had gone, I didn't care much what happened. I lived, to all intents and purposes, alone, and I knew Mary was safe.'

'Why didn't you go with her?'

'I intended to. I was all set to go. On the very morning we were leaving, Marcus said to me: "Don't go. Don't leave me, Lucille." He smiled at me. Touched me. There was a terrible fascination about him. You can't imagine it unless you've experienced it. I knew he was evil through and through. I knew he had no real love for me. I knew he went with other women often, probably treating them foully—but when he smiled at me,

when he made me look into his dark eyes, when he put his hands on my shoulders, and then kissed my hair, I was completely his.

'Marcus could make love, you see. He could make love wonderfully. He could make me happier than the greatest happiness you can think of. Then he could turn that happiness into nightmare. The things he did. Beyond description. The things a man and a woman can do together, naked, alone in a locked room. But I'd forget the horror when he touched me gently, looked at me with that wonderful smile, and asked me to stay. I hated and loathed and loved and adored him. And I stayed with him. Don't blame me too much.'

'Blame you! Oh, Lucille, I don't! I'm just so sorry about it all!'

She turned her haggard face towards me, a face tormented beneath the thick layer of make-up.

'I knew he was dead before they came and told me. It was one evening. At dusk. I was here alone. Suddenly I had a tremendous sense of freedom, as if a great black shadow which had been lying across me for years and years had been removed. I think I laughed aloud. I was laughing when the police came and told me. I still laugh when I think that he's dead and I'm free. Free. Free to go to Mary. Free to start afresh and forget it all. Oh, wish me luck! Please wish me luck!'

She held out her hands. I took them and pressed them hard.

'I wish you all the luck in the world.'

She turned her face away and began to weep, quiet tears, tears to soothe away the nightmare of her past. I let her cry.

At last she scrubbed her eyes hard and said:

'I haven't cried for years. I thought I'd forgotten how. So sorry. More coffee? Wait, I'll heat this up again. Have a look at that album while I try to pull myself together. There are some pictures of Mary in it.'

She tossed a photograph album to me, and while she went into the kitchen I opened it. I saw photographs of Mary. I stared and stared at them. A little curly-haired girl. Freckles. A tough, sensible little chin. And calm clear eyes.

Tom's eyes.

Now I knew for certain. My impulse was to say: But she's my child. This dear, normal little girl—she's mine. Yours is the child in hospital, the child who has always been a stranger to me, the child who tried to kill herself—the child who I now know without a shadow of doubt is shadowed by an evil ghost.

Then I felt sick with loathing of myself. The accident of birth was nothing. Linda was my child, my responsibility, my love. Linda needed me. Linda had to be saved. Saved from the grasping dark.

Lucille returned with more coffee.

'I haven't asked about Linda,' she said.

'She's ill in hospital. She has a fever. I must go now, Lucille, as I have to see the doctor at three.'

'Oh, my dear. I've been letting off steam about my wretched troubles when you must be worried to death!'

'I'm glad you told me everything,' I said. 'I'm honoured that you confided in me. Write to me from America, Lucille. Goodbye.'

As I left, I said:

'Make Mary happy, won't you? Make her *very* happy.'

She must have wondered why I should care so much.

8

THE sun was shining brilliantly as I journeyed back to the hospital. People were raising their winter-pale faces to the clear sky and half smiling. It was as if we were having a glimpse of the coming spring.

Soon I was out of the comfortable residential area where Lucille lived, back to the crowded narrow streets that had been home to me all my life. Here the sunshine was having a magical effect. Windows were open and women stood on their doorsteps. Children were playing. Vendors with stalls were doing a roaring trade. At one corner a pavement artist was making up for lost

time, emerging to do his work after hibernating the winter long. Farther along was the old man with the barrel organ, his red-jacketed monkey perched on his shoulder, children jostling round him. I saw Irene Renton among them and found myself looking instinctively for that other musician, the man with the violin, Marcus Greer.

But Marcus was dead, one of the dead who cannot rest. And Linda was haunted by this nebulous horror. Linda was dying of the dark. How could I fight the dark? I could have faced Marcus the man, driven him away from Linda with every power I could muster, but I couldn't hurt an aura, a cloud, an influence that could seize a little girl's mind and drive her to self-destruction. How could one combat this terrible power of evil? How could one defeat a melody played in the street by an unseen hand, a voice which spoke to a child and which one could not hear oneself?

I was no nearer a solution when I reached the hospital and was shown to Dr. Rivers's room. He was younger than I had expected, although his face had deep lines and marks of premature age. His skin was dry, parchment yellow, and his eyes were clear, deep blue and looked straight at you. He was unexpectedly nervous with me, offered me a cigarette, asked me how I was 'after my most uncomfortable midnight swim.'

'I'm quite well again,' I said. 'I want you to tell me what's the matter with Linda.'

He was silent for a few seconds, then said:

'I wish I knew. I'm doing everything I can, but I seem to be working in the dark. She's no worse, but she's no better. We can't get her temperature down. In fact, there's far more to account for than a douche in the canal. She must have been in a highly nervous state long before the accident—if it was an accident.'

He looked at me almost accusingly.

'Well?' he said.

I decided to tell him the truth.

'She jumped in, doctor. But it wasn't an ordinary case of suicide—if you can ever call such a thing ordinary. Someone was

urging her to jump. She wasn't acting of her own free will. I'll swear to that.'

'So someone was driving the child to kill herself.' He said this so matter-of-factly that I felt the idea was not incredible to him. A doctor, after all, has to accept as all in the day's work happenings that seem to ordinary people too horrible to believe.

'Who was it?' he asked.

'Doctor, do you believe in evil spirits? Do you believe that the spirit of a man who has died can come back and prey on the living?'

'For ten years,' he said, 'I worked in Africa with a party of missionaries. I worked among some of the most primitive tribes. I met people who sincerely believed that the ghosts of their ancestors came back for vengeance unless they had so many prayers said for them each day, so many offerings made to their graves. Once I saw a young man die because the ghost of his father came back for him. That was a tale the villagers told, the story the young man himself believed. I was sceptical about anything that wasn't flesh and blood before I started work in Africa. Now I'm not sure about anything. I have an open mind. "There are more things in heaven and earth . . ."'

'Dr. Rivers, my daughter is haunted.' I went on to tell him the whole story, and he listened, attentive, unsurprised. But his face grew white and strained as I went on, and when I finished he said: 'As far as treatment and nursing are concerned, we've done everything possible for Linda.'

'I know that.'

'There's only one thing left.'

'What?'

I expected him to say psychiatry, hypnotism, or some other accepted form of nervous or mental treatment, but he said: 'Prayer. When everything else has failed, that is the only answer. Strange that we usually leave God until last.'

'You believe in God?'

'I have to. I believe in Evil, you see, in the Devil if I must

personify it. Evil and Good—the Devil and God. Only the power of Good can drive out the power of Evil.’

‘It’s only words,’ I whispered. ‘Where do we find this “power of Good”? Even when I pray there is doubt in my mind. That makes my prayers useless. You, I, my husband, all of us adults, we have no innocence. There’s no “virtue” in us. It’s been driven out by laziness and life. If the man who is tormenting my daughter were here in the flesh, I think I’d have the strength to kill him, but this—this filthy shadow—I’m powerless against it. And so are you, doctor, aren’t you?’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘but I can think of some people who, by their very innocence, might have more power of God in them than you or I. Will you come to the children’s ward with me?’

‘Of course.’

The children had had their tea and were settling down for an hour’s rest before the lights were turned out. The young nurse I had met before became flustered when she saw the doctor. He looked at her severely and said: ‘It’s cold in here. I hope you weren’t deceived by the afternoon sunshine into turning the radiators off.’

‘No, doctor,’ she said. ‘I can’t understand why it’s so cold. The pipes are hot.’

The ward was chilly indeed. The children were quiet.

‘Are they always as quiet as this?’ I asked her.

‘They certainly aren’t. I don’t know what’s the matter with them. Perhaps it’s the cold. The whole place feels queer. They have all been extra restless for the past day or so, and now they’re extra silent. They act as if they’re waiting for something. They seem to be—to be listening.’

The doctor touched her lightly on the arm and gave her a swift, wonderfully kind smile.

‘Don’t worry,’ he said. ‘You go and have a little rest, will you? Give yourself half an hour, then come back. I shall be here until you return.’

This must have been a most unusual request, for she looked astonished. ‘What will Sister say?’ she said.

'Whatever she says, tell her I'm not to be disturbed in this ward for the next half-hour. Tell her it's important.' When the nurse had gone, he said to me: 'Fortunately the sister on this ward and I are good friends. She trusts me. Now, will you sit by Linda's bed and hold her hand? The children are going to say their prayers.'

Linda looked at me blankly as I sat beside her. When I put my hand on hers she gave no response. The life already seemed to be draining out of her.

The silence in the ward was frightening now. The air seemed to be growing colder and colder. The children lay still. Listening. Listening.

9

DR. RIVERS moved to the far end of the ward, his lean, tense figure outlined against the window. He smiled round at the children.

'Hello, everyone,' he said.

'Hello, Dr. Rivers,' the little voices chorused unevenly.

'Tell me, how many of you say your prayers regularly before you go to sleep?'

'I do'—'I do'—'And me!'

He turned to a fair-haired child, lying in bed with her leg up in a cradle.

'Why do you pray, Jenny?'

'Mummy tells me to.'

'Why does she want you to pray?'

'So God will keep me safe.'

'Safe from what?'

There was a silence. Someone whispered: 'The Devil.' One little monkey said: 'Income tax.' Then Jenny said:

'Wrong things.'

'Yes,' said the doctor quickly. 'Wrong things. Now I want you all to say a little prayer with me now, a prayer to drive away the

wrong things. There's no need for any of you to get out of bed. Just close your eyes and repeat what I say. And will you try to feel it, really mean it? Everyone ready?"

'Yes,' they said solemnly.

I held Linda's hand more tightly and tried to suppress the shudders which ran through me. For although Linda was burning hot it was cold in this corner, as if a chill shadow were blotting out all warmth. Surely the shadow was being cast from behind me. I looked round, but saw nothing. Yet I felt the evil presence with every fibre of my being. The hair stirred on my head. My skin was goose-fleshy. The horror was here in the ward, here among the children, here for one reason—to capture my child's heart and mind and body and take her away from me. The feeling of present evil was so strong that I could not now believe that anything the young doctor could do would make an atom of difference. I lacked faith.

He began the prayer.

'O God, we know that You love us . . . '

'O God, we know that You love us,' repeated the children.

' . . . and with all our hearts we ask Your help.'

'And with all our hearts we ask Your help.' This time I spoke the prayer with the children, spoke it for Linda and for Tom and for myself and for all the children in the world. The evil presence beside me seemed to draw yet closer and, faintly, to my ears came the sound of a violin. The music was incredibly sweet with the fascinating sweet sickness of evil, sweet as forbidden fruit. The children's voices faltered. They heard. I knew they heard.

'Drive away the evil which is about us,' said Dr. Rivers, his voice gaining strength.

'Drive away the evil which is about us.'

'Drive it back into the shadows from where it came.'

'Drive it back into the shadows from where it came.' Their voices rang out more certainly now and the music faltered.

'Let us not be deceived into thinking that evil is beautiful,' rang out the doctor's voice.

'Let us not be deceived into thinking that evil is beautiful.'

'However fair its face.'

'However fair its face.'

'Even if it comes in the form of sweet music.'

'Even if it comes in the form of sweet music.' Now every child was truly praying; their little faces tense, eyes tight shut. The music faded, halted, stumbled, halted again, as if the ghostly fiddler had lost his way.

'Let us be free to love and serve You!'

'Let us be free to love and serve You!'

'We believe in You. We trust in You.'

'We believe in You. We trust in You.'

'Lord, hear our prayer!' The doctor almost sang the words, for now the music had ceased. Completely.

'Lord, hear our prayer!' repeated the children, their voices echoing round the ward.

'Amen.'

'Amen.'

At the moment of the last 'Amen' Linda looked at me, not the vacant stare of a few minutes ago, but a look of calm recognition.

'Hello, Mum,' she said in a weak little voice.

'Linda—oh, my darling!'

'I feel poorly.'

'You've had a fever, darling. You're getting better now.'

'I don't want to go. I never wanted to go really. I can't remember what happened—but I didn't want to go . . .'

'Linda, don't worry about it now. It's over.'

'Don't leave me,' she said.

'I won't leave you.'

'Promise.'

'I promise.' She closed her eyes, and slept.

Dr. Rivers was beside me now. He looked exhausted, then gave me a small, twisted smile.

'Children can teach us something for all our know-all ways,' he said.

'She's asleep. She's going to be all right. She looks quite different. I promised to stay here. Will that be all right?'

'I'll arrange it,' he said.

'I don't know how to thank you . . . ' I couldn't go on for the tears thick in my throat. I caught his hand and pressed it momentarily against my cheek. And even at that moment of wonder and goodness, there was the inevitable touch of evil—I had the forbidden thought. I could love this man. I could love him more than I've ever loved Tom.

Dr. Rivers left the ward and a night nurse came on duty. The ward was dark and warm again, now. The children slept peacefully. During the night the nurse brought me a cup of tea.

'I've never known them sleep so soundly,' she said. 'Usually at least one wakes and cries, and lately it's been dreadful. They've been so restless. I think Dr. Rivers must have performed a miracle. What did he do?'

'He said their prayers with them,' I said. 'He *did* perform a miracle.'

Surely now the evil ghost of Marcus Greer had been destroyed for ever by the flame of goodness and purity, as filth can be destroyed by fire, destroyed as one day the whole putrefying world will be destroyed when it whirls finally into the very heart of the sun. Man was fighting a losing battle against the powers of evil, but here, in this ward, we had momentarily held back the tide and achieved one small victory.

Peacefully my daughter slept.

10

LINDA was home again. She was thin and pale still and in a highly nervous state, apt to start at sudden sounds. Sometimes I caught her with that listening expression on her face. But there were no mysterious absences. She stayed in her bed at night. Now she insisted on a night-light and we let her have it. Another thing I noticed was that she hated to be left alone. Whereas prior to her illness she had sought solitude, now she sought company. At

tea-time, 'before Tom came in,' she would follow me round, sometimes sitting and reading in the kitchen while I worked at the stove. Only when Tom returned, with his cheerful voice and big protective presence, would she return to the living-room.

When her school broke up for Easter she spent her time either with me or with Tommy and Irene Renton, but as soon as darkness began to fall she would come home. I never had to call her in as Mrs. Renton had to call her children.

'Linda is a good little thing,' Mrs. Renton said to me once. 'I yell myself hoarse sometimes for my kids to come home and they run off and pretend not to hear. Your Linda doesn't even need to be called. Remember how you used to worry about her in the old days?'

Remember? As if I could ever forget! I was glad that Mrs. Renton and our other neighbours knew little about Linda's breakdown. All they'd gathered was that she fell into the canal one night, the sort of mishap that might happen to any adventurous child.

I went to see Miss Abbot after the holiday to thank her for the kindness she'd shown to Linda and tell her we hoped the trouble was all over now. I left it all very vague and she said:

'They're distressing, these adolescent troubles. Fortunately they don't last. But she still looks frail. We must take good care of her.'

'I hope she's catching up again with her work?'

'Well, she has quite a lot of ground to make up, and I doubt if she'll regain her position as top of the class, but you've nothing to worry about on that score. She's very interested in music, isn't she? Have you a piano at home?'

'No, neither my husband nor I are musical, I'm afraid.'

'She's taken to playing the piano in her lunch hours, and our music teacher, Miss Ellery, tells me she has an instinct for music. She says Linda wants to learn the violin. We must encourage her.'

'No! I don't want that encouraged,' I said.

'But that's just what she needs. To have a hobby like writing, painting or music is a great help to a person all through life. I

know why you're against it. You're remembering that business of the street violinist. But don't you see that it was because the child needed some musical outlet that she followed that man, whoever he was, in the first place? If Linda could play the violin herself, she'd be much too busy doing it to bother about some incompetent street performer.'

'I'm sure Linda wouldn't want to play the violin.'

'Well, at least have a talk with her about it. Miss Ellery would give her lessons at school. Linda's nearly thirteen now and that's the time when a child's natural talents do begin to show themselves. It would be a pity to waste her talents.'

I made no promise, and there was a coldness between Miss Abbot and myself when I left. I felt that now she had relegated me to the ranks of obstructive parents who were the bane of her life.

That very evening Linda said:

'Mum, it's my birthday in three weeks' time. May I have a violin? Miss Ellery knows a place where I could get one that wouldn't be terribly expensive and could be paid for by instalments. I thought if you'd put down the first instalment for my birthday, I'd keep up payments out of my pocket-money.'

'Linda, I don't want you to learn the violin,' I said.

'Why not?'

'There's no money in music,' said Tom.

'I'm not interested in money,' said Linda scornfully. 'I just want to learn to play the fiddle more than anything else in the world. Please, Dad! Darling Dad! It wouldn't cost so very much—and Miss Ellery would give me lessons at school.'

She wound her arms round his neck, tugged his hair affectionately at the back and kissed him on the tip of the nose. 'Please, darling,' she whispered. 'I want it so much.'

'You little witch!' He was half laughing, half embarrassed. 'You think you can do what you like with me, don't you? Heaven help the young men when you're a few years older.'

'May I have a violin and learn to play, then?'

'I'll think about it.'

'We will *not* think about it,' I said, sounding harsh and angry because I was afraid. 'It's ridiculous. What use is a violin to a child like Linda? It's sheer waste of money. If she wants to tinker about on the school piano, it's her business, but I won't have this house made horrible with the noise of a violin.'

'Oh, come, love, that's not much of a reason,' protested Tom. 'She could practise in her room. She wouldn't make any more row than that chap across the way who practises his bugle for the Salvation Army.'

'I'm against it, Tom, and you know why.' I looked at him meaningly, but I had no chance against Linda. She pressed her strange little face against his and said:

'Darling Dad—please!'

'I've said I'll think about it,' said Tom. 'You go off to bed now like a good girl.'

'I don't want to go up alone.'

'Your mother and I will soon be up ourselves.'

'All right.' She went very slowly.

'It's time she got over this nervousness at being alone,' said Tom. 'Don't you think that if we encouraged this new craze of hers it might help her back to normality? It'd give her something to be keen about. After all, most teen-agers get some sort of craze—sport, films, crooners, acting, stamp-collecting, or something. Shall we let her have her violin? We ought to encourage her.'

'That's what Miss Abbot said.'

'Well, Miss Abbot should know. She's handled enough kids in her time.'

'But she doesn't know as much about Linda as we do, Tom.' And you don't know as much as I do, I thought. You don't know that you aren't Linda's real father. I can't tell you. I hope I'll never have to tell you.

'We ought to forget the past,' said Tom. 'I admit something queer happened to Linda a few weeks ago. Something beyond the understanding of either of us. But she's almost better now. She's still edgy; this business of hating to be alone will have to

be remedied. Apart from that we must think of her as a normal little girl. On the face of it this music business seems a waste of money—the instrument, the teacher and so on. But I don't mind being a bit hard up if this new interest will restore Linda to her old vitality. Let's forget the past and stop treating the kid as if she were made of Dresden china.'

'She's certainly won you round,' I said bitterly.

'I admit she has a way with her,' he grinned. 'She's going to be an enchantress one day.'

'You exaggerate.'

'Oh no. A man sees something in a girl that women often don't see. I've met girls who've had no special looks, but they've got that little something that makes the boys cluster round them. Men are the same. I've known men who seem ordinary enough to other men, but drive women mad over them. There's a special magic about such people. Linda may not know it yet, but she's got it.'

'Linda knows it all right. I watched her getting round you. She knew exactly what she was doing. She knows too much, Tom. She may be frightened of what she knows, but the knowledge is there. It makes me afraid.'

'How can you talk like that about your own child?'

We went on and on about it, and in the end I gave way.

'All right,' I said, 'all right! If you want Linda to learn the violin, I won't go against you.'

'Bless you! I'm sure it's the right thing to do. You'll see. Brrrr! Hasn't it turned cold in here? Let's get off to bed.'

I was shivering in the sudden cold.

IN the two years that followed it seemed that Tom and Miss Abbot had been right when they decided Linda should play the violin. From the time when she held her own fiddle in her hands—an inexpensive instrument compared with the best, of course,

but even then more than Tom could really afford—and started her lessons she became a changed person. It was as if all her life she had been waiting for this outlet. All her tension, her emotions, her fears, went into the music.

‘It gives me a feeling of power,’ she said to me once. ‘When I’m playing, nothing else matters. I feel as if I rule the world, as if I could make people follow me wherever I wanted them to go. I’m going to be famous one day, Mum. Nothing and no one can stop me. You’ll see!’

She became quite a leading light at school. It was at a school concert that I first realized how her music, even at this elementary stage, cast a spell over people. Technically, of course, she must have been imperfect, but even I, still prejudiced against her playing in spite of its apparently good effects on her health and spirits, was bewitched by her at that concert. She played one or two familiar items, then a piece composed by herself.

It was a strange, unearthly little melody. Its title on the programme was simply: ‘Come With Me’. But had she really composed it herself? I felt sure I had heard it before?

As I puzzled over its origin, however, I was caught up by the enchantment of the piece and the performer. I lost myself in music. When it was over I saw the faces of the children in the audience. They looked bewitched.

There was complete silence. Then applause broke out and they cheered Linda to the echo. As she stood alone on the platform, bowing gracefully, I realized that at fifteen she was a child no longer, but a woman. There was no childishness whatever about her now. She had an air of sophistication that owed nothing to dress or make-up, for she wore her school tunic and blouse, her face was unpainted, and her hair was worn long and straight as she had always worn it. Yet in that moment she was not a child who had made a success at a school concert, but a beautiful young woman who had exerted power over a crowd of people and was completely conscious of that power.

When the concert was over, Tom and I couldn’t get near Linda for the crowd of children who pressed round her. There

were some of her own class-mates, but on the whole it was the younger children who seemed unable to keep away from her, the little ones, with their innocent eyes and parted lips. Suddenly I felt there was something queer about it all. I wanted to snatch the small children away and tell them it wasn't safe here, to warn them—against what? Against my clever daughter? How absurd that seemed!

'It's no good trying to get near our daughter,' Tom said loudly. He was looking flushed and proud, speaking the 'our daughter' audibly so that people near us would know that we were Linda's parents. 'We'd better go home and prepare the fatted calf for her,' he said.

In the bus on the way home I said: 'That piece she composed. I'm sure I've heard it before.'

'You've heard her practising it.'

'I mean before then.'

'Well, she used to hum it sometimes a few years ago. I suppose she sort of made it up then, and now . . . ' He went on talking but I had ceased to hear him. For I remembered when I had heard the tune. In those dreadful days when Linda had first followed the ghost of Marcus Greer in the streets she had hummed that melody. On that moonlight night when Linda tried to kill herself, that was the tune I had heard in the air about me, a melody which faded into mist and moonbeams.

Terror gripped me. I went icy cold and crushed myself against Tom's warmth as we sat together.

'Darling, you're shaking. What's up?' he said.

'We've got to stop Linda from playing the violin!'

'Stop her? You must be mad! Tonight has cured all my doubts about it; not that I've had many during the past couple of years. I think our little girl is going to go far. We'll send her to the Royal College of Music. We'll give her every chance. Is it because we've got a genius on our hands that you're scared?'

'There's something evil about the way she plays—those children afterwards—and that tune,— Don't you see?'

'No, I don't. Linda was marvellous tonight. You make me furious.'

I shrank before the violence in his voice.

He went on: 'I'd never have thought you'd turn into one of those clinging mothers who try to prevent their children from doing anything on their own. What do you want to do? Take the fiddle away from her? Forbid her to play? Do you think she'd stand for that? Music means more to that girl than anything else, and if we forbade her to go on with it she'd walk out tomorrow. But I wouldn't dream of letting you stop her. It would be crazy—wanton cruelty.'

'Linda's like a stranger in the house now.'

'You're the stranger in the house, not Linda, when you talk like that. Are you jealous of her?'

'Tom, how can you ask that?'

'Because it's the only reason I can think of for the way you're acting.'

'Don't you see that all this has happened before?' I cried desperately. 'You laughed at my fears then, but I was right.'

'What's happened before? What do you mean?'

'That time she was ill . . .'

'Where's the similarity between then and now? She *was* ill then. That's the whole point. I admit I was slow in noticing it. But she's not ill now. She's radiant. And, my God, she's beautiful! I was proud of her tonight.'

'That's just it, Tom. *You're* proud of her. *You want* to boast to everyone about your brilliant daughter. You don't really care what happens to Linda herself. You don't care what's going on in her mind. You don't care that this power she has is twisting her—'

'I won't listen to any more of this hysterical rubbish. Come on. We get out here.' We alighted from the bus and walked along, hating each other. We had never differed so bitterly before. What could I, with my nebulous fears, do against Tom, who seemed to have all sense on his side?

When Linda came home she behaved normally enough.

'I've been interviewed,' she said excitedly. 'A reporter from the local paper was there. He took a photograph of me.'

'You deserve every bit of it,' said Tom, lifting her off the

ground in his happiness and kissing her. 'Mum and I were proud of you tonight.' He gave me an intense look and I said obediently:

'You were wonderful, Linda.'

'I hope Miss Abbot came to give you a few words of special praise,' said Tom.

'No, she didn't, as a matter of fact. She probably can't tell the difference between one note and another,' said Linda offhandedly.

'Linda, remember it was Miss Abbot who gave you the chance to do this in the first place,' I reminded her.

Linda smiled. 'I would have done it anyway. No one could have stopped me. Miss Abbot's nothing. I don't think she knows much.'

'No swelled head, young lady, please,' said Tom. 'You can play the violin, Miss Abbot can manage a school. She may not be able to do your job, but you certainly couldn't do hers.'

'Me? I could easily do her job. I can manage children. I can make them do anything I want. Didn't you see them tonight?'

'Yes, Linda I saw them,' I said, looking steadily at her, compelling her attention. The eyes which met mine were stranger's eyes, cold, hypnotic.

'Oh, Mum,' she said lightly. 'You're such an innocent!'

'What about some food?' said Tom, and, as so often happens, the normality of a meal averted a crisis.

The very next day I received a letter from Miss Abbot. She wanted to see me about Linda. Tom was pleased.

'She probably has ambitious ideas about Linda's career,' he said. 'I'll bet they've never had a musical genius at the school before.'

I hoped he was right in his surmise. When I saw Miss Abbot's face I knew he wasn't. The woman looked nervous, unhappy. As usual she came straight to the point.

'This isn't going to be pleasant for either of us,' she said, 'so I'll get it over quickly. I'm going to ask you to withdraw Linda from the school.'

'Withdraw her? But why? She's been doing well——'

'Her school work is good. Her performance last night was

brilliant beyond words. I've never heard anything like it from a child of that age. It's almost as if some outside power were playing *through* her, fantastic as that may sound. Linda may go far. Perhaps one day we shall see her name in lights. But I can't have her in my school any longer. She's a bad influence.'

'In what way, Miss Abbot?'

'Things have come to my ears recently, things which I should have known long before. I blame myself that I didn't see what was happening, but in these cases the Head is often the last to know.'

'Know what?'

'Linda talks too much to the younger children.'

'There's no crime in that.'

'If an older person talked to children the way Linda has been talking to them it *would* be considered a crime. How such knowledge, such evil thoughts, ever came into her head I don't know. I'm sure it isn't from you or your husband, knowing you both as I do. I have nothing but sympathy for you and I hate having to hurt you, but my school comes first. I cannot have Linda debasing the minds of the younger children.'

'What has she been saying to them?' I said with a feeling of doom.

'I can't even repeat it. Such things have hardly come within my own range of experience. I only found out certain details because one small girl has had a complete breakdown because of the—the filth that your daughter injected into her mind. The child is in hospital having psychiatric treatment, but I don't think she'll ever forget what brought her there. Once evil has been implanted in the mind, it stays there, a layer of scum which can never be completely removed.'

'It's since she started playing the violin, isn't it?'

'Yes. There may be no connection, though.'

'If only I'd stopped her at the start! Miss Abbot, she'll be leaving at the end of the year anyway. Couldn't you . . .'

'I'm sorry. She must go straight away.'

'And if I refuse?'

'I shall have to put the matter before the education committee and she will be expelled. As it is, you can make up some plausible reason for removing her of your own accord. That will be best for everyone.'

'I'll tell her tonight,' I said. 'She won't come tomorrow.'

I walked blindly away into the sunshine.

It was a blazing hot summer day. A beautiful, mocking day. As I passed down the drive, I glanced across to the playing field. It was still the lunch hour and schoolgirls were lounging in the sun. One group attracted my attention. It was a close, secretive group, a number of little girls of ten or eleven, and Linda in their midst. As I looked, a teacher walked swiftly across the grass and joined the group. She did it quite naturally, smiled, sat down among the children. Linda smiled with quick radiance. The younger children looked reserved and disappointed. I remembered the phrase a nurse at the hospital had used—a 'conspiracy of children'. I was filled with despair.

The house was hot and stuffy as I entered, the hall stifling. Without knowing why I did so, I went into Linda's room. Her violin lay there in its case. I suddenly had the feeling that if I could smash this symbol of the girl's power, everything might be changed. I took a step towards it. Then I was aware of something strange. On this blazing day in the midst of a heat-wave the room was cold. I stared round me, frightened. There were no dark corners, no hiding-places, no one was there, yet I felt unmistakably a presence. My heart beat so fast I could hardly breathe. I was choking. Then darkness fell before my eyes and the terrible coldness swamped me. I knew no more.

WHEN I opened my eyes again, Linda was bending over me, a glass of water in her hand. She had splashed water on my face and was saying:

'Drink this, Mum. What happened?'

'I must have fainted.' I managed to sit up and sip the water, then felt better.

'You gave me such a fright,' said Linda. 'I came in here in a rush and thought for a minute you were dead. Now, let me help you downstairs. It's terribly close in here.'

She put her arm round my shoulders and we went downstairs together. When Linda was gentle like this I could almost forget there was ever any estrangement between us.

'Now, you sit and rest,' she said, 'while I make some tea. You're not to move. That's an order.'

I sat limply on the couch, still feeling chilled and weak.

'What a scorcher of a day,' called Linda as she filled the kettle and rattled tea-cups. 'I don't wonder you passed out.' A minute later she came in with the tea and I summoned all my courage.

'Sit down, darling. I want to talk to you.'

'Oh, yes. You saw Miss Abbot. What did she want?'

'She wants us to withdraw you from the school.'

'What!'

'You're not going back tomorrow. She knows, Linda.'

'What does she know? I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I think you do.'

'This is a complete mystery to me, Mum.' Her eyes were wide and innocent. She was the personification of virtue wrenched.

I made a desperate effort to reach her.

'Linda, my dear, you know I love you. I'd do anything to help you. Can't you confide in me? Can't you tell me why you do these things? What drives you on? Don't be afraid to tell me. I'm the one person you can really trust. Make use of me. There was a time when you were ill in hospital and you told me you didn't want to go away. You asked me to stay. You made me promise. That promise holds good. I'm always here, whenever you want me. Yet every day you go farther and farther away.'

I think for a second I did reach her. Her hands gripped mine so hard that I gasped with pain. She gave a slight sob, and momentarily relaxed against me, like a child returning to love

and security after a long time away from home. Then she drew back and said calmly:

'Miss Abbot's mistaken. I've done nothing wrong. But if she doesn't want me back at school, I don't care. I'd like to leave. Lessons are a waste of time now. I want to go on with my music.'

'I'd like you to give up the violin.'

'Give it up? But why? Anyway, I couldn't. If you try to stop me from playing I'll go away and never come back. Never!'

At this moment Tom came in. He heard Linda's last words and looked at me suspiciously.

'How's the family genius?' he said to Linda.

'Flourishing, thanks,' was Linda's light reply. 'But poor old Mum's done a faint because of the heat. We've got to be nice to her. She's upset, poor sweet.'

'You fainted, love?' Tom was all concern.

'It was nothing. I'm all right now.'

'I'll get the meal ready,' said Linda. 'If you so much as step into the kitchen, I'll slosh you over the head with a frying-pan.' She gave me a sweet, mischievous smile. I saw it then. The charm she had. I could understand how the children were bewitched by her, how Tom could believe nothing wrong about her.

'Tom, before she comes back,' I said hurriedly, 'I must tell you what Miss Abbot said this morning.'

When I had told him, he was incredulous and furious.

'I'll fight this!' he said. 'I won't have my daughter treated like a criminal. I don't believe a word of what the woman says. She may even be jealous of Linda's popularity. You know what these schoolma'ams are. I'll see Miss Abbot myself tomorrow and give her hell.'

'Tom, if you do it will be far worse for Linda. Everything will be brought out into the open. She'll be disgraced. As it is, we can take her away of our own accord.'

'That's right,' said Linda, coming in from the kitchen. 'I'd like to leave. I'm sick of that daft school. The other girls are such babies and the teachers don't know they're born. I feel too old

for it all. The chops are under the grill. Would you like your potatoes boiled, chipped or fried?

'Chipped,' said Tom. 'I'll come and give you a hand.'

So they left me alone. I heard their voices, serious at first, then friendly and laughing. Linda as usual was 'wrapping Tom round her little finger'.

Of course, I thought, he's in love with her and doesn't know it. He's a man of forty, and he doesn't know she's not his daughter, and he's in love with her. She could tell him anything and he'd believe it. She could ask him to do anything for her, and he'd do it. She's beautiful and brilliant and—evil at heart. It's not her fault. The evil was injected into her when she was young, and although there was a time when I thought that evil had been destroyed, I was wrong. Evil cannot be destroyed, after all. It can only be kept at bay for a while. Now it's back with us, in Linda's strange lovely face and deep eyes, in the music she makes with her violin, in the words she whispers to children when they gather round her. Underneath it all there is another Linda, a very young Linda, who is lost and afraid and in the dark. The Linda who came back from hospital that time and couldn't bear to be left alone. The Linda who put her arms round me with real concern when she found me unconscious. The Linda who clung to me for one brief second as if I were a lifebelt in a black sea. That Linda is frail compared with the other one. I can't reach her any more.

'Damn you, Marcus Greer!' I whispered.

'Talking to yourself, Mum?' said Linda, coming in to lay the table. 'You should see poor old Dad trying to turn a chop while it's still under the grill. It didn't dawn on him to take out the grill-pan to do it.'

Tom called out: 'Any more cheek and I'll eat your chop as well as my own. I think these chips are done. Ouch! Got some fat in my eye!'

'Men!' said Linda. 'Aren't they hopeless? Why do women marry them?'

'Because they make better husbands than women,' said Tom

cheerfully. 'Grub up, everyone!' He came in, grinning. 'Cheer up, love,' he said to me. 'When you've had burnt chop and singed chips, prepared by Linda and Tom Incorporated, you'll feel a different woman.'

'Probably have violent indigestion,' said Linda gaily.

I tried to join in with their light-heartedness, although my limbs felt leaden and the food sickened me. Surely the worst nightmare of all is the one cloaked with laughter and gaiety. Nightmare. Here in the hot, sunny room, where a pretty girl and her father ate their supper with appetite and laughed together. It was fantastic that I should be filled with such fear and horror. Perhaps I was going mad. Perhaps this was how mad people saw the normal world, as a nightmare in sunshine, as evil clothed by normality. Perhaps the mad were the ones who saw things as they really were, and that was why we called them mad, because we couldn't bear the truth. I began to shiver again. I hoped they wouldn't notice. A glance at Linda's face showed me she wasn't noticing me at all. She wore an expression I had seen before. She was listening. Listening.

'Linda!' I said sharply.

'Yes?' She turned to me, her face blank.

'Get on with your meal.'

'But I've finished. Mum, you are in a state of nerves. Why don't you go to bed?'

'That's right,' said Tom. 'Push off to bed, love. Linda and I will see to the washing up.'

I was glad to get away from them.

Restless, sleepless, I lay in the hot bedroom. I heard Linda come upstairs. She looked round my door, smiled, and said: 'I'll play you to sleep, Mum. A long, long sleep. When you wake up all your worries will be over.'

A few minutes later I heard the notes of the violin coming from her bedroom. She played delicate, soft, dreamy little tunes that somehow drove all fear and anxiety away from me. I tried not to succumb to the sweetness of the music, but gradually my eyes closed and I slept.

I must have been music-drugged, for I didn't wake until late next morning. Tom had prepared his own breakfast and left a note.

'Look after yourself. Have a lazy day.'

Linda was out. I carried on with my normal work, trying not to worry about her. Then when I went into her room to dust I noticed that her violin wasn't there. I rushed to open her wardrobe. Most of her clothes were gone. The big suitcase which she kept under her bed was missing. The dressing-table was bare but for a note, which read:

Darling Mum,

I can't stay here any longer. I don't feel at home. Dad knows too little about me, and you know too much, but not enough. You both still think of me as a child, and I've tried to act like a child, but I can't keep it up. I am so old. I know so much. My childhood ended when I was twelve years old. Sometimes I have wished it could be recaptured. Sometimes, through you, I have touched it, longed for it. But it's no use. I must make my own life now. Please don't try to find me. Don't be afraid I shall be lonely. You see, Mum, I'm never really alone. There is always someone with me. I hope you enjoyed the little concert I gave you last night. It meant: I do love you, and goodbye.

Linda.

13

FOR months we tried to find her. The police were told of her disappearance and shown the note. They obviously thought she'd run away with a man. Tom and I made exhaustive inquiries in the neighbourhood. It was hopeless. The years passed. We heard nothing.

Then one day a man called on me. At first I didn't recognize him. He had white hair and was extremely thin, but as soon as he spoke I remembered his voice.

'Dr. Rivers! You of all people!'

'It's been a long time since that evening, ten years ago when we fought the Devil in a hospital ward,' he said with his ironical smile.

'Our little victory. It didn't last, you know.'

And I found myself telling him the whole story, from start to finish.

'It's one of the strangest things I've ever heard,' he said, 'but it answers a number of questions. You see, I've come to see you about your daughter.'

'About Linda? Where is she? Where?'

'I have a practice on the other side of London now, in one of the poorest areas. A few months ago a girl came to see me. She was unmarried and with child. She wanted me to get rid of it for her. Of course I refused. I asked her who was the father. She said: "I don't know—so many . . ." I examined her while she was there. She was only young, but she was in a shocking physical condition. If she'd been older, I'd have said it was the result of leading a vicious and degraded life—drugs, sexual excesses, the sort of things we doctors can never quite count as all in the day's work however often we come across them.'

'I asked her what she did for a living. She said she played the violin. She lived on various jobs in café orchestras, even sometimes in concert orchestras. Between such engagements she played in the streets.'

'In spite of all she'd been through, she had a most extraordinary charm. She could look like a haggard derelict of humanity at one moment, then, suddenly, when she smiled, a beautiful woman. She had her violin with her and I asked her to play. She did. Her playing seemed brilliant to me in my cramped little surgery. I felt that if it hadn't been for some weakness in her character she might have climbed to the top of her profession. Perhaps she still could, I thought, and I rather took her under my wing. I put her in hospital, where she was to wait until she had her baby, then I made plans to help her on to her feet again. It was only

then, when I saw her in a hospital bed, without make-up, her hair hanging over her shoulders, that I recognized her.'

'Linda!'

'Linda. The little girl who was haunted. I told her I knew who she was and suggested sending for you, but she wouldn't hear of it. She was so overwrought that I didn't dare cross her. I hoped that when the baby was born you and she could meet again . . .'

'Oh, yes, take me to her!'

'The child was born last night,' he said, his hand gently on my arm. 'It's a boy, and alive.'

'And Linda?'

'She died. A few hours before she died, she said to me: "Take my son to Mother. She'll look after him." Then she said nothing more until a second before her death, when she smiled radiantly and just said: "Father". That was the end.'

'So he won in the end,' I whispered.

'No,' said the doctor. 'There's the child. Will you have him? He's a funny little screaming thing and looks rather like a stewed prune at the moment. He needs you.'

'Of course I'll have him. Linda's baby! It's like a new life beginning!'

'What shall you call him? Linda didn't give him a name.'

'What's your name, Dr. Rivers?'

'David.'

'Then I shall call him David,' I said.

So the new life began. David arrived, pink and rebellious, tiny and adorable. He had Linda's strangely deep-set eyes and within a few months a small crop of red hair grew on his little bald pate. I remembered Lucille and her red hair. He was a delightfully ordinary child. There was none of Linda's queerness about him, nor her cleverness. He was rather a dunce at school. Tom and I didn't care about that, as long as he was happy and balanced.

On his twelfth birthday he asked for a toy train. We bought it for him, a network of little railway lines, miniature engines, carriages, signal-boxes. He set it out in his room—Linda's old

room—and Tom played with him there for some time. Then I heard David's indignant voice.

'After all, Grandpa, it is my train.'

Tom came grinning down to me.

'I thought I'd leave him to it for a bit,' he said. 'After all it is his present.'

'You'll be able to play with it when he's at school,' I teased him. We laughed together, carefree, light of heart. He took me in his arms as eagerly as he had done years ago when we were young and passionate.

'Happy, darling?' he said.

'Wonderfully. We owe an eternal debt of gratitude to David for getting born.'

'I had my doubts about it at first,' admitted Tom. 'The thought of a young child in the house, bringing him up and all that, but you were so keen to have him that I gave in. Now I'm glad for my own sake.'

'I'm so very glad, Tom, darling.'

He kissed me again.

'I'll go and collect David for tea,' I said. 'The kettle's boiling. Will you make the tea?'

'Sure, love.' He was whistling as he went into the kitchen.

I went up to David's room and opened the door quietly. The train lay discarded on the floor. Blue dusk had fallen outside and David was standing by the window, staring out. For a second his resemblance to Linda was striking, and so unexpected that I caught my breath. Yet he was not like her in feature. It was his expression. That intent, listening expression.

Panic, cold blind panic, surged up in me and I said:

'David, what are you doing?'

He turned, his eyes strange and excited. He said:

'I can't see anyone out there, but someone's playing the violin.'

BOOK TWO

CHILD IN THE DARK

THE dream is always the same. I am walking across a lawn in moonlight and I am afraid. Others walk with me, people in strange, colourful garments, crimson and gold, emerald and blue, strange and exotic in the moonlight like night flowers. Their faces are painted. Hospital nurses are there, incongruous figures among the rest, without paint or finery. We reach the shores of a lake with willow growing at the brink. My panic grows, my breath is short, my heart pounds. Some horror is about to break upon me in spite of the sheer beauty of the moonlit scene. Then the girl beside me, a girl dressed in a man's suit of black velvet, whispers:

'Look!' She points to the shore of the lake. I catch a glimpse of green in the water, a glimmer of white. I begin to run towards the lake, and as I run paralysis grips my limbs, darkness swamps me, I struggle as if I were drowning in black waters—and I wake.

Now, of course, I understand the dream. It is part of me, a symbol of the ineradicable past, but the first time I had it, many years ago, it had no significance for me. It was a nightmare fantasy from which I remember waking in the small hours in a blackness so complete that I was filled with that intense panic of not knowing where I was. I lay still, petrified with fear, not knowing why I was afraid. I strained my eyes in the darkness, and at last I picked out the glimmer between the curtains, grey against black, then, gradually, the familiar dim shapes of the furniture.

Shaking and sweating now, I sat up and switched on the lamp by my bed. I drank hastily from the glass of water on the

bed-table and fumbled for cigarettes and matches. My breath was so uneven, and my hands were trembling so much, that I had difficulty even in starting to smoke.

Gradually the gold light of the lamp and the familiar, pungent smell of tobacco smoke soothed me.

But I was afraid to put out the light again, afraid to go to sleep in case the dream should start again, or continue. Now I couldn't even remember the details of the dream. I only knew that it was horrible beyond compare. I smoked and read until pale dawn peered round the edges of the curtains and the night was over.

My breakfast coffee tasted particularly good that morning, although I found I couldn't eat anything. I felt very weary. My face in the mirror looked gaunt and white. I looked every one of my thirty-three years. By the time I'd perched my spectacles on my nose and twisted my hair up into its neat little bun I looked every inch a schoolma'am too! I remembered that once, a long time ago, a man had said: 'You know, you look quite pretty without your glasses and with your hair loose. What's the good of being a beautiful blonde if you make the least of your glories, you silly little thing?' and he kissed me, and I was wonderfully happy. That was a different world. A different life. A lost world.

Now my world was a world of children. Any affection I had to offer, any feelings I had left, belonged to them.

Not that I felt particularly affectionate towards children as I set out to school that morning, lugging my heavy case with its load of exercise books, cursing the fine rain which fell steadily as I made my way to the bus stop, strap-hanging grimly in the bus, surrounded by steaming macks and dripping umbrellas. All the time at the back of my mind was the half memory of the dream. Why should I have a dream like that? Why?

The school staff room was damp and dreary. A few opened umbrellas already adorned one end of the room like a multi-coloured fungoid growth. Momentarily it amused me to identify them with their owners. The big black gamp with the hooked handle belonged to Miss Worrell, the stout, grim-faced history

mistress who smoked interminably, read numerous thrillers and always wore black; the small gay umbrella with rainbow stripes was Miss Petal's—she was young, chinless, talkative, very gay, and much more interested in men than maths, which was her subject; the elegant black-and-white one with its long, thin handle belonged to Miss Lester, a smart, grey-haired woman in her forties, who would have looked more at home as a buyer for Harrods than she did as a physics teacher at an undistinguished grammar school for girls. Then there was the little red mackintosh hood which obviously belonged to Miss Gent, who was tubby, cheerful, wore red ankle socks, taught P.T. and scorned umbrellas as appendages of the lily-livered.

As I put my own umbrella among this motley collection I wondered if it indicated my character to the others as clearly as theirs did to me, if they drew dire conclusions from the fact that it had no ferrule and that the covering had detached itself from one of the spikes, which therefore stuck out crazily. A careless woman, I'd have thought. Someone who doesn't bother much about how she looks as long as she keeps dry. That was me all right.

Miss Petal noticed my weary face and said: 'Someone looks as if she's been out on the tiles.'

'Well, I can assure you I haven't,' I said rather irritably. 'I spent most of the evening marking books.'

'Most unwise! Taking books home is the beginning of the end,' said Miss Petal. 'I manage all mine in class.'

'And what do the children do?' asked Miss Worrell.

'I must find out some time, mustn't I?' said Miss Petal airily, giving me a wink.

I laughed and said: 'One day your sins will find you out. The Head will discover that the fifth form can't even divide and multiply.'

'Give those fifth-formers a chance and they'll multiply,' said Miss Petal. 'Most of them have got boy friends already. What would be really exciting would be if they started multiplying on the premises. That'd wake the old school up a bit.'

'Don't be disgusting,' said Miss Gent cheerfully. 'The hockey pitch is soaking wet. I shall have to give the kids indoor games.'

'Talking of indoor games,' went on the incorrigible Miss Petal.

'Not your sort, dear,' said Miss Gent quickly.

'Oh, you mean the dreary sort where they hurl netballs at each other and run races. No, thank you! By the way, you might be a bit gentler with the girls you take for games. Poor little Nina Trent had the most shocking black eye yesterday. When I asked her about it she looked embarrassed, then said she got it with a hockey ball.'

Miss Gent turned in surprise. 'I don't know anything about it. She didn't get hurt while I was in charge.'

'Perhaps she did it after school during sports practice,' I suggested.

'We haven't had a sports practice for a week,' said Miss Gent. 'The weather's been so bad and it gets dark so early. Who's taking Nina this morning? She's in IIIB.'

'I am,' I said. 'I've got them for English first period.'

'Then take a look at her eye, will you? If it looks bad send her along to me. Naughty girl, she ought to have come to me before.'

'You and your lame ducks!' sighed Miss Petal. 'If there's one thing worse than teaching P.T. it's being in charge of first aid, and you've got both. I don't know how you *live*.'

'As a matter of fact I died several years ago, but don't tell anyone,' said Miss Gent, stumping away before the rest of us, as she had to cross to the sports pavilion and change into her shorts, in which, incidentally, she looked horrible.

'I don't think it's fair,' said Miss Petal, 'that Gent should be allowed to miss school prayers every morning just because she has to change her clothes. Do you think that if I said I couldn't teach maths unless I changed into tights and a sweater the Head would let me off too? Of course, if it were a male Head and I said I was going to change into a swim-suit . . .' She rolled her eyes.

'Oh, Petal, for heaven's sake!' came a sigh from the big table where Miss Lester was belatedly trying to mark books.

'Sorry, Lester. Does my prattle bother you?'

'In a few minutes,' said Miss Lester with her rather affected drawl, 'I shall climb up the wall, then perhaps they'll put me in a nice quiet place with bars on the window to keep children out.'

'Why do we teach?' asked Miss Petal dramatically. 'We all hate it. We all think of the school as a prison, even old Gent who's haring up and down the field half the day. There's no future in it. The highest you can get is to be a Head, and then all you have to do is entertain boring old governors and fill in milk returns. Miss Worrell, why do *you* teach?'

'Habit,' said the big woman briefly, returning immediately to her cigarette and thriller.

'You, Miss Lester?'

'Holidays,' said Miss Lester. 'I like to have time to go abroad for several weeks in the summer.'

'I do it because I wanted to go to college and the only way I could get a grant was by promising the Institute of Education that I'd teach afterwards if they'd pay for me. Having sucked off the sugar, now I'm left with the pill. What about you, Eliot?' and she turned to me.

'I like children,' I said.

They all looked at me as if I'd uttered some frightful oath. Such a thing had probably never been said in a teachers' staff room before. Even Miss Petal was silenced for a second. Then she said:

'Sometimes one comes across the really hopeless case——' and we all laughed.

The bell rang for prayers and we trooped down to the hall. The rule was that we stood alongside the class we were teaching first period and I made my way to the two rows of girls that constituted IIIb, my own form.

Nina Trent was standing at the end of the row. She was a tiny, thin thirteen-year-old with skimpy dark hair in two little plaits, tied with bootlaces. Her tunic, evidently 'bought to last', was too long and wide for her. Her blouse on the other hand was too small, so that her neck and wrists seemed to burst from it like a chick from its shell. Her stockings were wrinkled and rain-

splashed and one of her plimsolls had a hole in the toe. She had an odd little face with tiny features, big dark eyes and an extraordinarily high brow. At the moment her general air of wreckishness was even more marked by the black eye, which Miss Petal had mentioned. She looked a poor, pathetic, uncared-for little thing and my heart went out to her.

As I took my place at the end of her row, she gave me a quick glance. When I smiled at her she tried to smile back, but I realized with a slight shock that she wasn't far from tears.

Nina was one of my favourites. I know that in theory a teacher doesn't have favourites and one always makes great efforts not to show preference for one child over another, but it would be inhuman not to have one's likes and dislikes. Children of thirteen are, after all, people. They are past the embryonic stage and have definite personalities. I liked Nina because she was keen on my subject (English), was quick, sensitive and intelligent in class, laughed at my feeble jokes (the surest way to win a teacher's heart!), and whenever I spoke to her rewarded me with an eager, affectionate smile that made her plain little face almost beautiful. Today the smile would not come, because she was nearly crying. I felt quite upset myself and decided that later I'd try to find out what was wrong. In any case I had promised Miss Gent to look at the child's damaged eye, so that would give me an opportunity.

Nina was subdued during English lesson that morning. I missed her eagerly raised hand when I asked questions. She just sat at the back of the room and didn't seem to take much notice of what was going on. This was normal for seventy per cent. of the class, but not for Nina, so when the lesson was over and the children filed out I said:

'Nina, wait here a minute, will you?'

I put my hand on her too-thin arm and drew her nearer to the window. 'Miss Gent asked me to look at that eye of yours. Does it still hurt very much?'

'No, it's all right,' she said.

'You did it with a hockey ball, I believe.'

'Y-yes.' She flushed and turned her head away.

'Did you, Nina?' I insisted gently.

She gave a sudden sob and put her hands over her face. They were rather grubby hands with cruelly bitten nails.

'Oh, Nina, my dear, what's the matter? Can't you tell me?'

'I can't go back—I can't——' she gulped. 'I could sleep here—I could sleep in the washrooms—I'm so frightened——'

'Of what, Nina?'

'Of him,' she said, wiping her eyes now with a little piece of cloth that looked as if it had formerly been used as a paint rag.

'Not your father?' I said.

'Yes,' she whispered. 'I must go to my next class now, Miss Eliot. I'm so late. Miss Worrell will be furious.'

My own class too had lined up outside the door and was waiting to be told to come in.

'Go across to Miss Gent, Nina, and let her put something soothing on your eye. You can explain to Miss Worrell afterwards. Now run along.' I put my hand on her hair with a small gesture of caress. For a second she pressed her face against my hand, then she fled.

I stood there, shaking with anger. So her father had struck her. Cruelty. A most terrible crime. And cruelty to children the most terrible of all. I suppose I must have been looking grim, for my new class gave me a scared glance and settled down very quietly. I set them work to do and went straight down to see Miss Gorringe, the head mistress.

She was a small, thin woman with a plain, sallow face, large mouth and crisp, reddish hair. She was kind, generous, downright, lonely and very efficient. She listened seriously to my story of Nina's wrongs, then said:

'Of course, she might have invented the story.'

'Miss Gorringe, if you'd seen her . . .'

'Once, in this very room, Miss Eliot, I had a poor little scrap of a girl with bruises on her arms which she swore had been given her by her stepmother. It turned out that her skin bruised easily,

she'd made the marks herself, and she was deliberately making things as difficult for her stepmother as possible because she resented her father having married again. Ever since then I've been wary about children's tales.'

'Nina would hardly give herself a black eye.'

'I gather her first version of the story was that it was done by a hockey ball. She only altered the story for your benefit. You're very sweet with the children, aren't you? They probably like to impress you. Thirteen is the age for drama.'

'So you don't believe her?'

'I didn't say that. I just don't think we ought to take it for gospel. Of course I'll investigate it.'

'Have I your permission to go round to the child's home in the lunch hour?'

She looked doubtful.

'I know the street where Nina lives,' I said. 'I could easily get there and back in an hour, and in any case I've got first period off this afternoon. I could make the excuse for calling that Nina's just joined the Dramatic Society and does her mother think she's strong enough to be out late on Monday evenings, when we have our meetings. Please let me go.'

She still hesitated, then said: 'All right. But be careful, won't you? I don't want the school involved in a libel action.' She gave me her quick, warm smile, and I was dismissed.

As soon as the last teaching period of the morning was over I set out. Fortunately the rain had stopped and within twenty minutes I reached Nina Trent's address.

The house was in a shabby street lined with tall buildings which had once housed the prosperous and servanted, and now had been divided into flats, with one or two families on each floor. Imposing stone porticoes were dingy and crumbled; small front gardens were neglected; windows were dirty and often uncurtained; children played on the cracked steps leading down to sordid basements or in the gutters, which were littered with paper, orange peel, old tins and shattered milk bottles. With

rapidly beating heart I climbed the steps to the front door and read the dusty card which was fixed to it by a rusty drawing-pin:

Sedges—1 ring.

Presticott—2 rings.

Lambert—3 rings.

Trent—4 rings.

I rang the bell four times.

Two minutes later I heard slow steps approaching the front door, which was cautiously opened. A sharp-faced little woman peered out. She was like a middle-aged caricature of Nina, the same big eyes, small features and oddly high brow.

'Mrs. Trent?' I said.

'Yes.'

'I'm Miss Eliot from the school. I wonder if I might have a few words with you about Nina.'

'What about?'

'Well—I'd like to go somewhere more private than this.'

'All right,' she said. She glanced up and down the street, then closed the door and led me up the four flights of stairs. The first floor smelt of onions, the second of frying fish, the third of bodies, and the fourth, Mrs. Trent's floor, didn't smell of anything which made a pleasant change. She took me into the living-room. There were patches of damp on the walls and the furniture was shabby, but the place was clean.

'Would you like a cup of tea?' she said.

'I'd love one.' I don't like tea much, especially the sort of tea that most people serve, strong, sweet and milky, but I thought it might oil the wheels of conversation.

When we were sitting at the table with its worn green baize cloth, cups of tea before us, I said:

'It's about the Dramatic Society, Mrs. Trent. Nina wants to join. It would mean her staying out rather late every Monday evening, and on other evenings if she got a part in the play. She seems rather a frail little girl and we wondered if you had any objections.'

'Why should I?' she said.

'Well, late nights . .

'We often have late nights here,' she said.

'That's not very good for Nina, you know. She's in a highly nervous state, Mrs. Trent. She broke down quite suddenly today. That's partly why I came to see you.'

'I thought there must be something. What's she been telling you?'

'Very little, but I was worried about her.'

'You're fond of her?'

'Yes. She's a nice, clever little girl. You can be proud of her.'

'I am,' said Mrs. Trent. 'Very proud. If you could have seen her the other night—— She's got too much courage for her own good, that child.'

'Your husband——' I began, then stopped as her expression changed to one of alertness and fear. Steps sounded on the stairs outside. Quick, confident steps. The door was flung open and a man came in.

He was not tall but held himself so upright that one did not get the impression of a short man. His insignificant appearance was belied by a quality of power about him and by his large, cold, blue-grey eyes. They were strange eyes, without expression, and when he looked at me I felt the touch of fear. Then he smiled—a smile so much like Nina's smile that my uneasiness vanished. It was a charming smile, frank, warm and friendly.

'Who's our guest, my dear?' he said to his wife, who had gone white.

'It's Miss Eliot. She's one of Nina's teachers.'

We shook hands and he said:

'What's young Nina been up to, then?'

'She's not been up to anything,' I said. 'I was wondering whether you objected to her joining the school Dramatic Society. It means her staying out rather late some nights.'

'But I'm delighted she should join! I'm an actor myself, so I shall be able to help Nina a lot. Of course, times are bad now. I'm resting. This isn't the sort of place we're really accustomed to, is it, my dear?' he said, indicating the room and turning to

his wife. 'But my fortunes will change. You'll see. You run the Dramatic Society, do you, Miss Eliot?'

'Yes, I do.'

'And what subject do you teach our Nina?'

'English.'

'Really. That was always my favourite subject at school. I still read a lot. I suppose she's a bit young for T. S. Eliot as yet?'

'A little. We don't get to him until the fifth form.'

'Pity. Have to struggle through Wordsworth and Milton first, I suppose. Bread and butter before cake. Talking of food, you'll stay to lunch?'

'It's kind of you, but I haven't time. I must go back to school.'

'I'll show you to the door.' Mrs. Trent was on her feet, ushering me outside. We went down the stairs in silence. She seemed stiff with fear. Only when we reached the front door did I say quietly:

'When can I see you again?'

'Better not,' she said, and closed the door on me. I stood alone on the steep steps, shivering suddenly in spite of the sunshine which now flooded the streets, making the former rain glisten silver on the pavements.

Something queer and evil was going on in that house. A frightened child with a wounded face. A terrified woman. A man with a charming smile, cold eyes and a taste for T. S. Eliot.

I stopped for a quick lunch at a snack bar and by the time I reached the school again the first lesson of the afternoon had begun. As I was free that period I sat in the staff room, a pile of exercise books before me, and tried to mark them. But I couldn't concentrate. Nina's tear-stained face and her mother's frightened eyes haunted me. Then my dream of the night before kept returning, fragmentary, full of fear. There seemed to be no connection between the dream and the events of the day, yet, unreasonably, I felt there was. I jumped violently when Miss Worrell came in, banging the door.

'Is Miss Gent here?' she asked. 'No? I thought perhaps she was free. I'll have to go and fetch her.'

'Why, what's happened?'

'Nina Trent's fainted. I've put her in the sick-room to rest, but I think Miss Gent should take a look at her. Extraordinary thing. I was giving a lesson on Australia, the first convict settlements, brutal treatment handed out to convicts. Perhaps a bit too grim, but I don't like to gloss my history over too much—it's not a namby-pamby subject and children usually lap up the gruesome details. Then I looked at Nina. She was staring at me with such horror. I said: "It all happened a long time ago, Nina," then she just flopped over the desk in a faint. Of course, it may not have been anything to do with the lesson. They do have queer turns at that age. Now, I must fetch Miss Gent.'

She hurried out again.

I went along to the sick-room, a small, fusty room with a slippery leather couch and one little window. Feeling ill was not encouraged at the school. A luxurious sick-room means a constant flow of patients, especially at examination time. But when I saw Nina, I wished the room were brighter. She looked such a white-faced scrap of humanity with her battered eye and small, controlled mouth.

'How are you feeling now, Nina?' I said.

'I'm better, thank you. It was silly of me to faint.'

'Was it the lesson that upset you?'

She looked away, was silent for a second, then said: 'Oh no. I just felt funny. Miss Eliot, I'm sorry about the fuss I made this morning. I hope you didn't think I meant what I said about my—my father. I got this black eye from being hit with a hockey ball. I made the other story up because it sounded more interesting. I do make things up sometimes.'

'Nina, are you telling me the truth now?' I said sternly.

Her eyes filled with tears and she whispered: 'Oh, do leave me alone.'

She looked so wretched I hadn't the heart to question her further, and in any case Miss Gent came bustling in at that moment.

'Where's the invalid?' she said. 'Hello, old lady, what have you been up to?'

'I only fainted,' said Nina. 'I'm all right now.'

'Headache?'

'A bit of one.'

'I don't wonder. That eye must hurt a lot. Now I'm going to give you a couple of aspirins and a glass of water and you're going to lie here until you feel all right again. Come and see me during afternoon break and if you're still feeling rotten we'll pack you off home.'

'I don't want to go home early, Miss Gent.'

'You'll do as I say, child,' said Miss Gent, giving Nina's plaits a little pull. 'Now, take these.'

Obediently Nina swallowed her aspirins with water, then lay down on the couch.

'If you can sleep, all the better,' said Miss Gent. 'All right?'

'Yes, Miss Gent. Thank you.'

Miss Gent and I left the sick-room together. Nina, pathetically small on the couch, lay very still.

'Poor little scrap,' said Miss Gent. 'She should have stayed at home for a couple of days with that eye.'

'You think that's all that's the matter with her?'

'Oh yes. Nervous shock, pain, headache. I'm glad you sent her to me this morning, by the way. She got the blow from a hockey ball, playing after school, not in one of my classes, thank heaven. My daily nightmare is that some wretched child will break a leg in the gym or brain herself falling from the parallel bars.'

'You don't think she's—frightened?'

'Frightened? What by?'

'Oh, I don't know.' I didn't want to start spreading rumours about Nina. Any information I thought I'd acquired I should take to Miss Gorringer first.

I went to see Miss Gorringer during afternoon break. She was busy with a pile of forms—probably the milk returns, which were the bane of her life—and looked up with a slight frown.

'I saw Nina Trent's parents in the lunch hour,' I said.

'Oh yes.' She put down her pen and turned her full attention on me. 'Well?'

'I didn't like the atmosphere. Mrs. Trent seemed scared, and the father—well, he's an out-of-work actor, quite charming in a way, but I felt there was something queer about him. He had strange eyes.'

'Dear me!' She gave me a slightly ironical glance. 'What did Mrs. Trent tell you about Nina? Anything?'

'She didn't get a chance. He came in while we were talking and she closed up like a clam. But I'm sure it's all wrong for Nina to be there, Miss Gorringe. What are we going to do?'

'We can't do anything. You can't start breaking up families because they seem odd to you, Miss Eliot, and the fathers have strange eyes.'

'But if he's treating Nina badly?'

'We don't know that he is.'

'I think he is. I think he's scared his wife and daughter into silence. Nina told me this afternoon that it *was* a hockey ball that gave her that black eye, but I don't believe her. Can't we inform the police?'

She shook her head.

'The police wouldn't touch a job like that on such fragile evidence.'

'You mean they wait until damage has been done?'

'We don't even know if there is damage,' she said. 'Nina hurt her eye. You say she seems scared. She cried and said her father did it. In the next breath she denies that. You must admit it's a muddle.'

'I suppose so.' I felt deflated. I'd gone to her feeling like a crusader, all set to right a wrong, and now I found that the wrong was so nebulous that it couldn't be righted by direct action at all.

'Nina fainted this afternoon,' I said. 'When Miss Gent said she could go home early, she didn't want to.'

'Some of them are like that,' said Miss Gorringe. 'They hate to give in, or they want to make a good impression and do the Joan of Arc stunt . . .'

'You're so cynical!'

✱ 'Miss Eliot, I know children. I don't blame them for self-

dramatization. It's natural. It's often the intelligent, sensitive ones who go in for it most—I can remember putting on some very good acts in my own schooldays—but we mustn't be too solemn about it. As for Nina, we can do nothing for the moment, but keep an eye on her, just in case.'

'I hate her haying to go back to that house!'

'Miss Eliot, where else can she go? Don't you think you're being a bit too imaginative about this?'

'No, I don't, Miss Gorringer!'

'Well, I do. Please don't do anything rash that might give the school a bad name. We don't want to get a reputation for snooping into the private lives of our pupils.'

The bell rang for the end of break. I was teaching next period so I had to go, cursing inwardly at these bells. Whenever one was doing something really important, the bell would ring and one moved like a slave to do its bidding. School life turned one into a zombie with a degree. Zombies with degrees. I must tell the staff that one. Miss Lester would appreciate it if no one else.

I was rather late leaving school that afternoon. It was Friday and I liked to get my affairs in order so as to start with a clean sheet on Monday. Blue dusk already cloaked the streets and the street lamps burned dull gold. As I left the school gates, my pleasure at the thought of the coming weekend was marred when I saw a small figure walking ahead of me. Walking very slowly. Reluctance in every step.

It was Nina Trent.

She was going home.

2

It was one of the traditions of the school to put on a Shakespearian play at Christmas for the benefit of proud and bored parents. I, as English teacher, had the job of producing it. It meant a lot of extra work but there was a certain fascination in taking a hand.

of enthusiastic girls, who didn't know a thing about acting except what their instinct told them, and shaping them into a cast of not incompetent players. This year we were doing *Hamlet*, partly because one of the school governors had suggested to Miss Gorrington that it would be a 'good thing' and as she wanted new washrooms she thought it as well to please him, and partly because one of the sixth-formers, a girl called Marian Clay, was a talented natural actress. She was a slender, dignified girl with handsome features and straight mousy hair which she wore shoulder-length. I thought she could sustain the part. I had certainly never had anyone else in the Dramatic Society who could touch it.

We held our meetings on Monday evenings. As soon as the last lesson was over, Dramatic Society members surged up to the dining-room, where, at sixpence a head, we provided them with tea, bread and butter, jam and cakes. When they had gorged themselves, we all adjourned to the school hall and got down to work.

On the Monday after Nina's emotional outburst in the classroom, we held the first meeting of the term. There was a stir of excitement in the hall as I stood on the platform to read out the list of parts. As there were always more members than parts my method was to cast one part to two people, usually a senior and a junior. The senior would probably play the part in the long run, while the junior had excellent practice and acted as understudy.

I had cast Nina and a fifth-former, a pleasant, reliable girl, as Ophelia. Everyone automatically concluded that the older girl would get the part—until we tried them both out in the famous 'Get thee to a nunnery' scene. Ophelia's lines are ordinary enough. Until her speech at the end she has little to say. Much depends on facial expression and gesture. I tried the older girl first. She was adequate. With coaching she'd get by. Then I tried Nina.

The other children were restless as the scene began. Casting is tedious compared with actual rehearsing. But as soon as Nina spoke her first lines, her audience became silent. She stood there

on the big, bleak platform, a tiny scrap of a girl with her odd little plaits, plain face and bruised eye, and suddenly, to all of us, she *was* Ophelia. She had that extraordinary knack, possessed by certain famous actresses who have no claim to beauty, of making herself seem beautiful when the part demanded it.

When Marian, as Hamlet, made the bitter speech which begins 'Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?', Nina's fear and heart-break showed in every line of her sensitive face, every gesture of her small body, and her short, frightened answers to his questions, her little cry of: 'Oh, help him, you sweet heavens!', were spoken from the heart.

Her final speech made me shiver with its poignancy, and when she finished on a note of fear and tragedy:

'Oh, woe is me,
To have seen what I have seen, see what I see!'

there was silence in the hall. Then the girls began to clap, most unusual during casting. Nina gave a scared look round and fled from the stage. She was a schoolgirl again.

I said: 'That was beautifully done, Nina.'

She flushed. The girl who was her rival gave a small grimace and I heard her murmur to her friend:

'There goes my part.'

The friend said: 'Miss Eliot wouldn't give a big part like that to anyone so young. You'll get it.'

The other girl shook her head.

'I wouldn't want it now,' she said. 'That funny little kid can act.'

Yes, Nina could act. With some regret, as the older girl would be leaving at the end of the year and this was her last chance to act in a school play, I entered Nina's name opposite that of Ophelia on my list.

By the end of the meeting half the parts had been allotted. The rest would be done the following Monday.

'Won't you tell us who's been chosen?' said one of the girls.

'No, I'll wait until the cast is complete, then you shall know.'

They grumbled about 'prolonging the agony', but grinned at me in a friendly enough fashion as they rose to go home.

It was nearly seven o'clock when I reached the empty staff room, feeling cold and tired. Just as I had put on my coat, there was a knock at the door. I called 'Come in' at the top of my voice—this was necessary as the room was almost sound-proof, a good thing in some ways but trying on the lungs in others—and Nina entered.

'You left your *Hamlet* in the hall, Miss Eliot,' she said, holding out my battered and much annotated copy.

'Oh, thank you, Nina. How did you enjoy your first meeting?'

'Very much.'

'I liked your performance of Ophelia. You'd studied the part before, hadn't you?'

'Yes. I've read most of Shakespeare to myself. I want to be an actress one day.'

'Following in your father's footsteps?'

'Oh no!' she said. 'No! I'm not a bit like him!'

'Not in character, perhaps, but you may have inherited some of his talent.'

'Am I going to get the part, Miss Eliot?'

'Nina, you mustn't cheat. I can't tell you before everyone else, now can I?'

'I suppose not.'

With the strong sense of justice that most children have, and which gradually deserts them as they become adult, she didn't press me to answer her. She recognized that it 'wouldn't be fair'.

'You'd better be going home,' I said. 'It's dark.'

'I don't mind the dark. I wish I could stay out late every evening.'

'It would be very bad for you. Your eye looks a bit better today. Does it still hurt?'

'Hardly at all. It still feels enormous, though.'

'I'm sure it does. I remember when I had a sty in my eye it felt like the side of a house.'

'My eye feels like the sides of two houses,' she said with a little grin.

'Poor child!'

'Well, good night, Miss Eliot.' But she still lingered at the door, as if she wanted to say something more but didn't know how to begin.

'Anything wrong, Nina?'

'No. No, nothing, Miss Eliot. Good night.'

She had gone almost before I had time to reply. I lingered for a moment, looking out of the window, seeing the girls straggling out of the building towards the school gates. Only when most of them had gone did Nina appear, alone, spindly-legged, lugging her satchel of books, moving very slowly.

That child hates going home, I thought. She's afraid. What *can* I do? Perhaps she sensed my attention, for as she reached the gates she turned and looked at the school. She saw me standing in the lighted window, paused beneath the street lamp outside, smiled and waved.

I waved back, and, surprisingly, felt the pain of tears behind my eyes. There was something about that brilliant, affectionate smile that touched my heart. And she looked so very little and alone as she walked away into the darkness.

3

THE next time I met Nina's father was on the day of the school prize-giving. This was held at half-term so that the fussation it involved would be over by the time Christmas with its play and parties was upon us.

As usually happens when there's a school function it poured with rain. This would put some audiences off, but parents are gallant creatures. Swathed in plastic macks and bearing dripping umbrellas, they will suffer much to see the apple of their eye take a prize or sing in the school choir. Some of them even have a natural curiosity to see the staff about whom their children gossip endlessly. A father will be surprised to find that 'Miss So-and-so',

whose word is law and who is quoted at length when any important subject is discussed, is only a slip of a girl of about twenty-two and probably knows no more about anything than he does himself. A mother looks with interest at some object of a daughter's hero-worship and sees only a tired, middle-aged woman no more impressive than herself. Parents are a little chary of teachers, thinking them 'stuck up'. Teachers are very chary of parents, knowing them to be touchy and belligerent when roused.

Some teachers are very good with parents. Miss Petal, for instance, was wonderful with fathers. She'd flutter her long eyelashes at them, smile sweetly from her chinless little face and pour forth a flow of cheerful chatter that would make them forget their shyness and their best suits. Miss Worrell, although far better as a teacher and respected by the children, made no headway with parents at all. She was gruff with them, almost rude. She carried her boredom with school functions like a banner, and when it all became too much for her she'd slip back to the staff room for a quiet read and smoke. Miss Lester looked good, therefore she was usually stationed in the entrance hall to welcome guests, but her elegance scared all but the most confident parents and she never received any confidences about Mollie's pimples, Jennifer's speed of growing or Shirley's brilliance at cooking the Sunday joint 'even if she wasn't very good at her lessons'. Miss Gent treated the parents as if they were an enormous class of extremely stupid children.

'That's all they are,' she said cheerfully in the staff room that day, before we went down to our various duties. 'They're no more intelligent than the kids—intelligence doesn't increase after about fourteen, so how can they be?—yet they know less because it's longer since they left school. Their discipline is all to pieces, they can't carry out a simple order. Shepherding parents from one place to another is far more difficult than shepherding children. The parents don't seem to take in what you're saying half the time. I remember the difficulty I had getting them to come in out of the rain last sports day because the last

ances had been cancelled. They just didn't seem to take it in. As for reading notices, they're completely contra-suggestive. You've only got to put up a notice saying "Not This Door" and that's the door they'll promptly use. It's my private opinion that half of them can't read.'

'Some of the fathers are sweeties,' said Miss Petal. 'One took me out for a drink afterwards last year. Don't look like that! He was a widower and his daughter was leaving that term. It was most respectable, and when he saw me home afterwards he didn't do more than shake hands.'

'Gentlemanly or slow?' I asked.

'Both,' she grinned. 'He rang me up a week later and asked if I'd go to a football match with him. I said football bored me stiff. I never heard from him again.'

'Who's on duty with me in the entrance hall?' asked Miss Lester. She was looking magnificent in her gown, which had obviously been cleaned and pressed for the occasion, a contrast to Miss Worrell's, which looked as if she'd just wiped a blackboard with it.

'I think I am,' I said. 'Let's look at the map.'

Miss Gorringe made out a plan for us on these occasions, a neat, geometrical affair with little matchstick figures to indicate where members of staff should stand as the parents arrived. With an unexpected sense of comedy she sometimes gave these little figures a resemblance to the real people: the figure representing Miss Worrell had spectacles on and a cigarette in its mouth, that of Miss Gent held a hockey stick, and I was picked out from the rest by the little 'bun' on top of my head.

We chuckled over the plan for a few minutes, then noted that Miss Lester was on duty immediately inside the doors of the entrance hall, while I was farther in, next to the door of the assembly hall itself.

'You needn't bother with programmes, then,' I said. 'I'll distribute them at the hall door. I'll get a prefect to help me.'

'Thank heaven she's tucked me behind the scenes,' said Miss Worrell, for she had 'platform duty', her job being to see

that the 'right number of chairs were ready for the, V.I.P.s and that the prizes were piled in the right order on the table behind which the prize-giver would stand. 'When I've done my chores I shall come up here and hide.'

'We'll tell on you,' said Miss Petal.

'If you do, I'll tell on *you*—leading respectable fathers into low drinking-haunts indeed!'

Most of the staff were on duty in the hall itself, deputed to keep the children as quiet as possible. Usually the parents made far more noise than the children, but we weren't allowed to do anything about them. They even talked during the speeches sometimes, a crime which would have been followed by dire punishment if a child committed it and were caught. Operative word 'caught'.

'The enemy's advance troops are in sight,' said Miss Petal, looking out of the window. 'To the guns!'

I glanced at the 'advance troops'. Three small black mushrooms were crawling up the path.

'Poor dears,' said Miss Petal. 'What a night for them! I suppose they'll have to hug those wet umbrellas all the time.'

'I certainly shan't let them leave their umbrellas in the entrance,' said Miss Lester. 'We'd never get them sorted out again.'

'Good heavens, no!' agreed Miss Gent. 'It would be worse than the grand lost plimsoll sort-out I have every week. They'll have to clutch the dripping objects all through the speeches.'

'Who'd be a parent?' murmured Miss Petal.

'Serves them right for coming,' growled Miss Worrell. 'The whole business is a farce.'

'Why not liven it up by putting the prizes in the wrong order, Worrell?' suggested Miss Petal.

'I shall probably do that without trying,' gloomed Miss Worrell. 'I'd better go and worry over that now.' She trailed out, a solid, sombre figure in her ancient gown.

'Poor Worrell! How she hates this sort of thing,' chuckled

Miss Petal. 'She hasn't the remotest idea how to handle parents. It makes one wonder whether she had any of her own.'

'She probably just hatched out of a bookworm egg in the British Museum Library,' said Miss Gent. 'I say, there are some more coming. We really ought to go down.'

So we gave a final touching up to our hair and faces, adjusted our gowns (except Miss Gent, who, being P.T., was spared from wearing one of those amorphous garments) and made for the door. Miss Gent, incidentally, had made one concession to the gravity of the occasion. She was not wearing her ankle socks. She had unexpectedly trim ankles.

When I reached my post at the hall door, I found some prefects already loitering there, looking excited and self-important. Marian Clay was among them.

'Oh, Marian, get a pile of programmes from the office, please, then you and I will hand them out.'

'Yes, Miss Eliot.' She ran off eagerly, glad to have something definite to do.

The other prefects clustered round me.

'Can we have some too, Miss Eliot? We can hand them out in the hall.'

'Yes, you can all have a few, but don't be too lavish with them, will you? There are only a limited number.'

'One per family,' said one girl. 'If dad has one, mum can't.'

'My mum and dad had one each last year,' said another girl.

'I'd have put them in detention if I'd known,' I said, which simple and corny joke threw them into paroxysms of laughter. It is flatteringly easy to entertain the young! Unfortunately I knew that this quip would probably be repeated at home, and the parents concerned would think: That Miss Eliot must be dim!

Marian returned with the programmes. The prefects fought over them. I saw Miss Lester cast a disapproving glance in my direction, and said quietly:

'For heaven's sake get away from this door. The parents are trying to go through it.'

The first parents, too early and thus programme-less, were

already in the hall, steaming gently in the central heating. Others were now arriving in quantity.

Marian was looking glum as she handed out her programmes, so I said:

'Not so much of the Hamlet now, Marian. A bright fixed smile is required.' This made her giggle and drop a couple of programmes.

After that, everything went smoothly. The parents sidled shyly past the beautiful Miss Lester, bore down on Marian and me in little droves, took the programmes beamingly, exclaiming how odd it was not having to pay for them. Sometimes, it is true, they jammed the doorway, forgetting for the moment that they weren't trying to board an underground train in the rush hour, but when they found there was no shortage of space inside this aggressiveness wore off.

My smile by this time was so fixed to my face that I wondered if I'd ever be able to take it off. Marian was in the same plight.

'Isn't this welcoming act a strain?' she said. 'Give me *Hamlet* any day. It's much easier going round hating everyone.'

'I think we can relax now. Most of them have arrived.'

The foyer was empty but for a few stragglers. A wet trail led from the entrance doors to the hall and occasional wet footprints skirted the main trail, as if an odd parent here and there had tried to get away. They had failed. Even these scattered prints returned at length to the assembly hall door.

The V.I.P.s were on the platform now. The school had risen. Some of the parents made a half-hearted attempt to rise, but by the time they'd managed it Miss Gorringer had told the school to sit. The parents waved up and down like a stormy sea and eventually settled again. Marian and I closed the doors and heaved a sigh of relief.

'You'd better go inside now, Marian.'

'Can't I stay out here for a bit?'

'Well, just for a few minutes, in case there are late-comers.'

'Here's someone now.'

He came in, a short, upright figure in a good, well-pressed but

rather shabby suit. He smiled charmingly at Miss Lester, who responded to him with unusual friendliness. They stood chatting for a minute. Then he came towards me.

'Good evening, Miss Eliot,' he said. 'I'm afraid I'm late.'

'That's quite all right, Mr. Trent. Couldn't your wife come tonight?'

'No, she's not well. She sent her apologies.'

'Oh, I'm so sorry. Well, you'll find some empty seats just inside this door if you'd like to slip in. You'll see Nina on the other side of the hall, sitting near the front with the third-formers.'

'Thank you.'

When he had gone, Marian said:

'Is that Nina Trent's father?'

'Yes.'

'Attractive, isn't he?'

'Is he, Marian?'

'Oh yes,' she said definitely. 'He's not good-looking or anything, but he makes you feel woofy. Still, I wish he'd stop telling Nina how to act Ophelia when her own ideas are good enough. Miss Eliot, I wanted to talk to you about this. Nina's not as good as she was, is she?'

This was a problem which had been worrying me for the past fortnight.

'Not quite,' I admitted. 'But give her time. There are several weeks to go before the performance.'

'She was so wonderful at the first rehearsals, but lately she's become sort of stilted. She's not as easy to act with as she was at first. I did ask her what was up once and she said her father was coaching her. I think it's cheek when you're supposed to be doing that. You tell her one thing, her father tells her another, and the poor little kid doesn't know where she is. I just wouldn't let my father carry on like that. Not that he would. He's a darling. But she seems scared of her father. Can't imagine why. I didn't see anything scarifying about him, did you?'

'He's a very charming man.'

'Yes, woofy.'

'Oh, Marian!' I laughed and she burst into giggles.

'I think perhaps if *you* said something to Nina, or to her father, Miss Eliot—you could speak to him tonight . . .'

'Marian, I think you'd better go into the hall now instead of gossiping here with me, pleasant as it's been.'

'All right, Miss Eliot. But I thought I'd tell you.'

'I'm glad you did. Now inside with you!'

Marian made a small grimace and disappeared inside the doors, to endure, poor child, the succession of tedious speeches which are imposed on parents and children alike on these occasions. I knew perfectly well that I ought to go inside myself, so I went up to the staff room for a cigarette instead. Needless to say, Miss Worrell was already there. She had the electric fire full on, her feet up, a cigarette alight, a novel on her lap, and was thoroughly enjoying herself.

'Miss Worrell!' I said in my best imitation of Miss Gorrings's voice, and she jumped violently.

'I'll get my own back for that,' she said grimly. 'Come and have a cigarette. Have the old greybeards started drooling yet?'

'They have. The chairman is having his usual difficulty with aitches. Poor man, he drops so many I wonder he doesn't frame a speech without any in it at all. As it is, words beginning with aitch have a fatal fascination for him.'

'We all long for what we haven't got,' sighed Miss Worrell. 'Seen any good parents lately?'

'Last to be admitted was Mr. Trent, Nina's father. Marian Clay thinks he's woofy, whatever that may mean.'

'Probably makes her go goose-fleshy with delight, the way these crooners are supposed to. That reminds me, Nina Trent's been looking peaky lately. Are you overworking her in that damned play of yours?'

'I'm worried about her,' I admitted. 'She's trying so hard, but she just isn't good at rehearsals. The other children are noticing it. Marian mentioned it to me just now.'

'Marian's playing Hamlet, isn't she?'

'Yes, very well, too. But she says her scenes with Ophelia are

being damped down by Nina's acting, or lack of it. She says Nina's father is coaching her for the part—he's an actor, you know.'

'I didn't. Where's he playing?'

'He's not at the moment. He's out of work. He probably keeps the home fires burning with occasional film "extra" work or something like that.'

'And he's coaching Nina one way and you another, is that it?'

'I'm afraid so. She's getting confused and I don't quite know what to do about it.'

'Can't you speak to him tonight?'

'I could, I suppose.'

'Then do that, my dear. He's perhaps quite unaware of what's happening. Parents are well-meaning on the whole. They need guidance. I'd abolish the lot of them.'

'I'll try to talk to Mr. Trent in the interval.'

I relaxed and lit a cigarette. Now we could hear regular bursts of clapping from the hall. That meant the prizes were being distributed. This seemed to go on for a long time. Then there was silence, which meant that the distinguished educationist who was presenting the prizes was making a speech. It was pleasant not to be down there listening to him. Fifteen minutes later there was a tumultuous noise of applause. The uninitiated would think that this was because the speech had been brilliant. Miss Worrell and I knew that it meant the speech had concluded with the speaker's giving the school a day's holiday—not that the children really gained anything by this, as the school had an allocation of holidays for the year and a day 'presented' by an outsider would merely be taken off the ration elsewhere. They didn't know this sad twentieth-century fact, however, and applauded their benefactor with a will.

'Interval,' said Miss Worrell.

'We'd better go down and be affable.'

'Show me the interesting Mr. Trent. Do you think he ever met Ivor Novello in olden times?'

'I haven't the faintest idea. Why?'

'I used to be in love with Ivor Novello,' said Miss Worrell, adding, with a sharp look, 'and it was no laughing matter.'

'These things aren't,' I said sadly. 'I've never quite got over Ronald Colman myself.'

'How much duller life is when one is past the age of loving the unattainable,' she sighed, and we nodded together like a couple of old crones discussing our misspent but delicious youth.

The foyer was crowded with people. Miss Lester was still there, talking quietly to an intellectual parent, male. Miss Gent was chatting with two very stout parents, female. Miss Petal entertained a little circle of young fathers. Small family groups of interested father and mother and acutely embarrassed daughter stood in silence or wandered aimlessly. I saw Mr. Trent near the hall door talking to some prefects. They were girls whom I taught. To me they were children, but tonight I saw them as young women, engaged in the age-old pastime of being attractive to the male.

'There he is,' I said to Miss Worrell.

We made our way towards the group.

'Mr. Trent,' I said, 'may I introduce you to Miss Worrell? She takes Nina for history and she wants to know if you ever met Ivor Novello.'

'Alas, no,' he said, laughing and shaking hands with her, 'but once in my youth I shared a dressing-room with a performing seal.' The prefects pealed with laughter, and he told a few anecdotes of stage life which brightened the atmosphere considerably. There was no doubt about it, Mr. Trent was 'one for the ladies'. Then the prefects scattered, Miss Worrell was drawn into earnest conversation by an indignant parent who couldn't understand why her daughter always failed her history exams (it didn't cross her mind that her daughter's brains could easily be stored in a pin-head), and Mr. Trent and I were left together.

'How's the play going?' he asked.

'Pretty rocky at the moment, but we've several weeks left for rehearsal.'

'I've been helping young Nina quite a bit.'

'That's kind of you.' My courage was failing me. I didn't know how to tell him to stop 'helping' her.

'Oh, I enjoy it. I make her go over the scenes again and again until she has every inflection, every gesture, just right. It's fascinating training the young.'

'I hope you're not overworking her.'

* 'Miss Eliot, if she intends to be an actress, she must become accustomed to working hard.'

'I know, but she's only a little girl . . .

'She's thirteen. I was acting in pantomime at that age and long before.'

'The only thing is,' I said, plucking up my courage at last, 'I think perhaps your ideas and mine are different. We don't want to confuse her.'

'Has she complained to you?' He turned those cold, strange eyes towards me and I felt my heart-beats quicken.

'No, of course not.'

'I'm glad to hear it.' He looked round the foyer, then called: 'Nina!'

The child was with a group of her contemporaries. They were giggling and chattering, but Nina was pale and silent. She jumped nervously, too nervously, when she heard his voice. Then she came across to us. She gave me her beautiful, warm smile and then cast a wary look at her father.

'I've been telling Miss Eliot how hard we've been working on Ophelia. We enjoy it, don't we, Nina?'

'Yes,' said Nina.

'There you are!' He turned to me. 'Nina and I are both determined that her performance shall be perfect. There isn't a stage trick that I don't know, and I'm teaching her the lot. She'll have the professional touch and she'll act all the others off the stage.'

Nina looked embarrassed.

'I'm proud of my clever daughter,' said Mr. Trent, putting his

hand on Nina's dark hair. She stood there, petrified at his touch, her face so white.

'I'm sorry your mother couldn't come, Nina,' I said, to change the subject. 'I hope she'll soon be better.'

The remark seemed to paralyse Nina. Then her father gave her a quick, fierce look and she said:

'She'll be all right.'

'Give her my regards, will you?'

'Yes, Miss Eliot.'

A bell rang for the end of the interval and people began to drift back to their places.

'I must go,' said Nina, and fled.

'What happens now?' asked Mr. Trent.

'The choir sings, someone recites Kipling's "If", someone else recites "He Fell Among Thieves", then you can go home.'

'The things I've done for England,' he murmured. 'Well, I don't expect I shall see you again this evening, Miss Eliot, so I'll say goodbye. It's been so pleasant meeting you again. And don't worry about Ophelia. I'll get a performance out of that child yet.'

'But that's just what I don't want——' Too late. He was already on his way back to the hall. I was oppressed by a sense of failure, a feeling that I'd let Nina down.

I slipped in at the back of the hall and sat among the audience. The choir was gallantly doing its stuff, the anxious music mistress pounding away on the piano. Except that the sopranos occasionally sang sharp it was a creditable performance. I studied the audience, so much more interesting than the performers. The mothers looked weary, as if they'd been on their feet all day and wished at this moment that they were back by their own firesides. The fathers were frankly bored. Perhaps some of them were musical. The children looked tired and untidy, their neatness and enthusiasm had worn off. It was a long evening for them. Nina was at the end of a row. Her little face looked drawn, almost old. I clenched my hands with vicarious pain. He's cruel to her, I thought. I'm sure he's cruel to her. Those eyes. . . .

I looked for him among the parents. He was gazing at his daughter, eyes wide and cold, mouth set in lines of harsh bitterness, the mask of his facile charm quite forgotten. His fierce stare drew Nina's attention. Slowly she turned her head. She met her father's eyes, and I saw in her young face an expression of contempt and hatred. She loathed him with every fibre of her being, and she was helpless against him. Helpless with the terrible helplessness of the young.

4

THAT night I couldn't get Nina's tormented face out of my mind. Even my dreams were haunted by it. I had a vague nightmare of tears and terror and woke in the darkness, trembling, afraid to sleep again. I got up, made some coffee and huddled over the electric fire, trying to decide what to do. I knew so little. All my suspicions were guesswork. I knew that Nina was afraid of her father and hated him, but I had no tangible evidence, only my own instinct and observation to go by. I wanted to call at the Trents' house again and see Nina's mother, but how could I be sure of not finding the father home too? And could I do it without Miss Gorringe's knowing? For I was sure she wouldn't approve of such unwarranted interference.

The small hours passed coldly, slowly, and I felt tired and depressed when I set out for school. It was a bad day in the staff room. Everyone was weary and tetchy. Even Miss Lester looked as if she'd put on her make-up in a hurry and Miss Gent insisted she'd caught a cold through leaving her socks off the day before. Small tiffs blew up between us, and the icy wind which blew through the badly fitting windows didn't improve our tempers. Miss Worrell had run out of cigarettes and wasn't fit to speak to.

Shrouded in gloom, I went along to my first class. They took one look at me, gauging my mood as children do instinctively when the teacher comes in, and decided, rightly, that this was not

the morning to take liberties. I set them working on a few horrible exercises in parsing and analysis and felt no pity when they sighed. Then I noticed that Nina's desk was empty. An extra rehearsal was fixed for that evening and I'd specially wanted Nina there.

'Where's Nina Trent this morning?' I asked.

'She's away, Miss Eliot.'

'Is she ill? Does anyone know?'

Nobody knew. Nobody seemed interested. I remembered then that Nina had no special friends. She got on quite well with everyone, but whereas most of the children belonged to a twosome or a gang, Nina was alone. I wondered why. Was she afraid that if she made close friends she'd have to take them home? To ask one's best friend to tea and have the invitation returned was a general rule among the children.

'I expect she's got a cold,' said one of the girls.

'I've got one, but I didn't stay away,' said a smug little girl in the front row.

'Get on with your analysis,' I said unsympathetically, and then thought what a bad-tempered beast I was being. If there was one thing I disapproved of it was a teacher who, when feeling low, took it out of the class in her charge, and now I was doing that myself. Obviously if you teach long enough the iron eventually enters your soul.

The morning dragged through, cold and sunless. Miss Gent's cold grew worse.

'Don't be surprised if I'm away tomorrow,' she said, as we sat round the staff room fire after a stodgy school lunch of 'toad in the hole' (mostly 'hole') and ginger pudding (mostly pudding).

'Oh, no!' said Miss Lester. 'Don't be away! I've got two free periods tomorrow and I can't bear the thought of losing them.' We all tended to be unsympathetic about staff ailments, for if anyone was ill her classes had to be taken by those who remained. It meant cancellation of free time.

'Do you good to have to tear about the hockey field for an

hour, Lester,' said Miss Gent adenoidally, adding sadistically, 'in the rain.'

'If I have a P.T. class dumped on me,' said Miss Petal with spirit, 'I shall just put them in the gymnasium and make them sit still and not speak while I mark books.'

'Personally,' said Miss Worrell, 'I'd lock them all in a gas chamber.'

'Poor old Worrell! Why don't you go out and get some cigarettes?' said Miss Petal.

'It's so cold out. However, perhaps I will.'

She piled on an assortment of shapeless garments, including snow-boots (which she wore constantly out of doors from October to May), and trailed out. We relapsed into silence, broken only by an occasional sneeze from Miss Gent.

Then the telephone rang. Miss Petal answered it eagerly. Sometimes her men friends rang up and she treated the whole staff to long enigm'atic conversations, accompanied by smiles and twinkles which would have made any sensitive telephone blush. Today she said disappointedly:

'It's for you, Eliot.'

It was rare for me to receive a call at school and I felt uneasy as I answered.

'Hello, is that Miss Eliot?'

'Speaking.'

'This is Nina—Nina Trent.'

'Oh yes.'

'I'm awfully sorry, Miss Eliot, but I can't come to rehearsal tonight.'

'That's all right, Nina. Have you got a cold?'

'No, it's not me that's ill. It's my mother. I've got to look after her.'

'I am sorry. Nothing serious, I hope?'

'I—I don't—I think—I've got to look after her.' The squeaky little voice rose and broke. The child was crying.

'Nina, what's the matter? Can't you manage? Is your father there?'

'No, he went out early to the film studios. He's hoping to get some work. There's just me, and I can't leave her.'

'Have you had the doctor?'

'She won't see a doctor.'

'But she must if she's ill.'

'She won't. It's no good.' Again the heart-rending sob.

'Darling, don't cry. Just wait there and I'll be round in twenty minutes. Don't worry. I'm coming.'

'Miss Eliot, you mustn't—'

'Don't argue. I'm coming. Goodbye.'

I rang off and went straight to my locker for my coat.

'What's up?' asked Miss Petal. 'I'm longing to know who "Darling" is.'

Darling. Had I said that? How foolish!

'It was Nina Trent,' I told them. 'Her mother's ill and she's there all alone with her and scared to death. Poor little thing's crying her eyes out. I'm going round there.'

'You can't,' said Miss Petal. 'What about your classes?'

'Be sure you ask Miss Gorringer first,' said Miss Lester.

'I'll see her as I go out; not that she can stop me.'

'I think you've got a nerve!' exploded Miss Petal. 'That means I shall lose my free period. You can't go chasing after every child with a sick mother—it's crazy!'

'It's a bit rash, Eliot,' agreed Miss Lester. 'You might catch something infectious.'

'Then I shall be away for weeks and you'll all have to take my classes, won't you?' I said sweetly, and walked out, leaving a storm of protest behind.

Miss Gorringer wasn't in her room, so I left a message with her secretary, Miss Burton, saying I'd been called away and might not be back this afternoon.

'I'll explain when I see her,' I said.

'It had better be good,' said Miss Burton dourly. She had a touch of after-the-prize-giving blues too.

Twenty minutes later I reached Nina's home and rang the bell. Immediately I heard her quick, light steps on the stairs.

'Oh, Miss Eliot, you shouldn't have come!' she cried. 'If my father found you . . .'

'He won't,' I said. 'Take me up to your mother, Nina. If she needs a doctor, I'll send for one.'

'But she can't have one—Father would never allow it—you don't understand—'

'I certainly don't. Nina, I'm coming up with you. Trust me.' I put my hand on her shoulder. Such a thin, fragile little shoulder. For a second she leant against me and looked up with that intensely loving expression which hurt me by its vulnerability, yet made me feel strangely happy.

I gave her plait a tweak and said: 'Lead on, Ophelia.' We closed the front door and turned towards the stairs.

As I placed my foot on the first step, Nina just ahead of me, we heard the key in the front door. Nina gave a cry and turned round. Her terror infected me and I could neither move nor speak, only stare at the slowly opening door.

Then I saw his small, neat silhouette in the opening and his light eyes which seemed to shine like a cat's.

'Hello, Father, wasn't there a job after all?' Nina asked shakily.

He made no reply. He walked towards us, leaving the door open behind him.

'I'm afraid we can't ask you in, Miss Eliot,' he said. 'My wife is unwell.'

My heart hammered and I gripped the banister.

'I'd like to see her if I may,' I said.

'I can't allow it. She's not well enough.'

'Then perhaps I could fetch a doctor for you.'

'That is not necessary.'

'Nina, go upstairs in case your mother needs you,' I said, then waited until the child's steps faded and the door upstairs slammed.

'Mr. Trent, I want to see your wife.'

'I am not aware,' he said, 'that you have been invited to this house at all.'

'There are times when one has to come without invitation.'

'And this is not one of them. Will you please go?'

'I have a responsibility towards Nina.'

'If that's all that's worrying you, she can go to school this afternoon. She only stayed with her mother because I had to go out. I can look after my wife now. Is it the custom for teachers from your school to pursue truant children in person? Not that Nina's a truant in the real sense of the word, but there was really no need for her to stay with her mother. She just wanted to, and I find an affectionate relationship between mother and child quite touching, so I made no objection. You of course, having no children, wouldn't understand that.'

'I understand that for some reason you don't want me to see your wife.'

'My reason is that she should be kept quiet and not be embarrassed by strangers. She's a very houseproud woman—you may have noticed—and when she's ill the place becomes messy and untidy. She'd never forgive me if I brought up a visitor at such a time.'

'So you refuse to let me see her?'

'Frankly, I resent your interference. You implied to me last night that I was interfering with my daughter's progress in acting. I, an actor! I, who know more about the stage than you will ever know with your pathetic amateurish efforts! I resented your remarks very much, although I tried not to show it. Now I find you forcing entry into my house. If you're so crazy about children, Miss Eliot, why don't you have some of your own instead of indulging in this unhealthy pursuit of my daughter? Allow me to see you to the door.'

I was sickened, horrified. In a few sentences he had turned even my affection for Nina into something unclean.

'You're insulting!' I whispered.

'You don't have to put up with my home truths any longer,' he said. 'The door is open.'

I had to get away. It was cowardly, perhaps. Afterwards I regretted that headlong flight. Afterwards I suffered agonies of remorse, wished I had forced my way up to that room, ignored

his insults, even risked his violence. But at that moment all I felt was fear and loathing. I walked out through the open door, and when I reached the street I almost ran.

5

I REACHED the school some time after the first lesson of the afternoon had begun. The staff room was empty. That meant Miss Petal was taking my class. I should have gone straight along to relieve her, but a terrible weakness overcame me and I almost collapsed into the chair by the fire. I fumbled for a cigarette with a hand trembling so much I could hardly light it. I sat there quietly for a few minutes, trying to pull myself together, then went to talk to Miss Gorringe.

She was busy, as always, but resignedly put aside her work when she saw me.

'I got your message, Miss Eliot. I hope you haven't had bad news.'

I must have looked pretty shaky, for she added: 'You'd better sit down. What's happened, Miss Eliot?'

I told her all that had happened, only omitting Mr. Trent's final remarks to me. It sounded a foolish story.

When I'd finished, she shook her head and said:

'You shouldn't have gone. Parents are very touchy about interference. They simply do not want teachers barging in on their private lives, and I don't blame them. Evidently Mr. Trent is a tough, difficult man, although I admit he's always seemed charming when I've met him. Perhaps he is rather harsh with his family. Many fathers are, especially in the poorer neighbourhoods. But that's no excuse for your making a scene on his doorstep. I'm quite shocked by your actions. I would never have given you permission to go in the first place if you'd asked me. Your first duty is to your classes. Surely you've been with us long enough to understand that.'

'So you're not going to do anything about it?'

'About what? Mrs. Trent is ill, Nina gets frightened and upset at being left alone with her—she's a nervous little girl and I can quite understand that—but after all she does have neighbours, I presume. She rings you up, you go rushing round, the father turns up, fully able to look after his wife and decide whether she needs a doctor or not, and you enter into a violent argument with him. No, Miss Eliot, you've *made* all this trouble. It wasn't there before.'

'But you haven't seen Nina as I have. Every day she looks so pale and unhappy. I can't stand it. . . .'

'If you will give a child of that age a big part in the school play what can you expect? This Dramatic Society business is fine for the older girls, the ones who are finding school cramping in many ways. It gives them an outlet. And it's all right for the little ones as long as you don't give them too much to do and see that they don't have too many late rehearsal nights, but you give a nervous little girl a big part, over the heads of seniors, then you wonder why she looks strained. I think perhaps you'd better give the part of Ophelia to one of the others.'

'I *couldn't* do that. It would break Nina's heart.'

'There you are, you see. When they're that age they take it all too seriously. I expect that part means everything to her. She's even got her father coaching her, you tell me. She's working herself up into a state about it. If you let her go on, she'll continue to be in a nervous state until the play is over. If you stop her, she'll be shattered with disappointment. You must please yourself what you do about that. The Dramatic Society is your affair and I try not to interfere. You do a wonderful job there, and you mustn't think I'm unappreciative, but don't let your keenness on the final performance of the play blind you to the human element, Miss Eliot. Don't play with children's hearts.'

'How can you say that? Play with children's hearts! As if I'd do such a thing!'

'Nina worships the ground you tread on. You know that.'

'She likes me, I know. Perhaps she has a little crush on me. That's not so unusual in this place. Look at Miss Petal's enormous

following. Yet you don't accuse her of "playing with children's hearts". They fall in and out of love with us just as one day they'll fall in and out of love with young men.'

'And their main aim, then as now, will be to attract the attention of the beloved. Don't you see that Nirfa wants to attract your attention? She wants you to think her interesting, even tragic. She has a romantic heart. She rings you up and makes mysteries and weeps at you over the phone—so dramatic—not quite real. Be kind to her, but don't take her too seriously. Think all this over calmly, Miss Eliot, and you'll see that I'm right. Don't think I'm unfeeling. It's just that I've had so much experience of adolescent children, and of emotional, impulsive teachers, like yourself, who go rushing headlong into trouble with the best of motives. Now there's the bell. You'd better go to your second class or Miss Petal will be after your blood.'

She patted my shoulder in a maternal fashion and gently but firmly showed me the door.

It was the second time that day I'd been turned out. I was growing used to it.

In the corridor, where children marched in not very neat lines to their classes, I passed Nina's class. She was there among them. So her father had sent her to school, as promised. Was it possible that Miss Gorrington was right in all she said? It had sounded so reasonable, but I didn't believe a word of it. I myself had felt the touch of terror in the presence of Nina's father. There was something about him to fear, something abnormal, something evil. He wasn't just a 'harsh father'. He was a man with cruelty in his heart. I was as certain of that as I would ever be of anything.

I paused where Nina stood, waiting outside a classroom with the others.

'Rehearsal tonight?' I said.

'Yes, Miss Eliot. I'll be able to come.'

'Everything all right?'

'Yes, thank you.' Her face was blank, her voice cold. I felt rebuffed. Only when I had moved away from her and then glanced back did I see her eyes following me. Eyes full of love and

longing. They made me want to rush back and take her in my arms and promise that she need never go back to that house again. But of course I couldn't. I was as much a prisoner of circumstance as she was herself.

6

FOUR people had been called for rehearsal that night, the three senior girls who were playing the King, the Queen and Laertes (Ophelia's brother), and Nina as Ophelia. We were going to try the 'Mad' scene. The music teacher had coached Nina in the songs. The child had a light, pleasant voice and, as the music teacher pointed out to me, 'It doesn't matter if she goes off key now and then, as she's supposed to be crackers.' All the King and Queen had to do in the first part of the scene was to show anxiety and remember their cues, which they did adequately. Nina had to be a beautiful young girl driven mad with grief.

The part had been played in many different ways by professional actresses, sweetly and prettily, as if to be mad were something quite ladylike, if a little pathetic; and harshly, realistically, showing that for all Ophelia's fairness there is nothing of beauty in a vacant mind.

I gave Nina no hints as to how I wanted the scene played. I thought I'd see what she made of it, then make suggestions afterwards, if necessary. The children turned up punctually and took their places on the big, draughty platform, while I sat in the body of the hall. I felt apprehensive about Nina. She looked tired and strung up and I wondered if her performance was going to be as stilted as it had been in previous recent rehearsals of other scenes.

As soon as she spoke her first lines, I knew I had nothing to fear. Her blanched face became distracted, her eyes stared, her first line, 'Where is the beauteous majesty of Denmark?', was spoken in a cold, high voice that immediately gave the impression of someone not in a normal state of mind. When she sang, her voice

was sweet, harsh, grief-stricken by turns. Her air of crazed haughtiness at the end of the first half of the scene, 'Come, my coach! Good night, ladies; good night, sweet ladies; good night, good night,' was perfectly done. Of course, it was an amateur performance. There are some inflections, pauses and gestures on the stage that only come with years of training and practice, but Nina acted the part from the heart, and that was what I wanted of her.

'Very good, Nina,' I called out. 'Very good indeed. Do it like that on the night and you've nothing to worry about.'

'It gave me the shivers,' said the girl playing the King. 'Does she have to be *quite* so mad? After all, Ophelia is a pretty young girl.'

'You'd prefer your Ophelia with sugar on?' I smiled.

'When I saw it done on the stage, Ophelia was simply sweet when she was mad. You wanted to pick her up and cuddle her. Nina wasn't a bit like that.'

'I'm not the type that people want to pick up and cuddle,' said Nina, laughing. It was good to hear her laugh.

'Every actress has her own interpretation of a part,' I said. 'I think Nina's is very moving.'

Nina gave me that quick, beautiful smile.

'Now, we'll skip the next bit,' I said, 'and start again where Ophelia re-enters. Laertes, give her her cue—"How now, what noise is that?"'

'How now, what noise is that?' said the stolid, plump young woman who was playing Ophelia's brother.

'Try to sound a bit more alarmed about it. Your beloved sister has lost her reason and you hear her voice. You sounded more as if you'd just heard the milkman outside.'

Laertes giggled. 'I can't make "How now" sound sensible,' she protested. 'I always want to follow it up with "brown cow".'

'Well, I've never been called that before,' objected Nina, and they all collapsed into laughter. She went on 'Anyone can say "How now". That's easy. I've got to say: "They bore him barefaced on the bier: Hey non nonny, nonny, hey nonny." It's awful!'

'Pity about the beer,' murmured Laertes, and we laughed again.

'Now we really must get on,' I said. 'We don't want to be here all night. Laertes—"How now . . ."'

We rehearsed industriously for half an hour, and by the time it was over we were tired but satisfied. Another few weeks of rehearsals as successful as that one, and I'd feel fairly confident about the play.

'Go home now, all of you, and get a good night's rest,' I said cheerfully. 'You've earned it.'

'What about homework?' said the King dourly.

'In the circumstances, anyone who's got English homework for me may skip it.' A cheer went up. Thus easily is popularity won!

I heard their laughing voices dwindle towards the cloakrooms. Only Nina lingered.

'How's your mother now, Nina?' I asked.

'She'll be up again tomorrow. Miss Eliot, I'm sorry about this afternoon. I shouldn't have telephoned. But I didn't think I'd be at rehearsal and I had to tell you.'

'Of course, my dear. Nina, if ever you need help, don't hesitate to call on me.'

'Why should I need help?' Her expression was wary.

'If ever you do—I'm here. That's all.'

'Thank you,' she said. 'Oh, thank you so very much.!' Her eyes filled with sudden tears. She went quickly away.

My own eyes ached as I made my way back through the cold, deserted school to the empty staff room.

7

I HAD so much to do during the next few weeks that Nina loomed less largely in my mind. I was still conscious that she didn't look well, that there were shadows under her dark eyes, that she was unnaturally quiet in class, but she turned up at

rehearsals, knew her lines, did her part extremely well—and there were so many who did *not* turn up for rehearsals, forgot their lines and did their parts extremely badly that my time was fully taken up with them. I admit the play became almost an obsession with me as the time for the final performance drew near. Each year I told myself I'd take it all calmly, be philosophical, not care whether it was a success or not, but each year I found myself getting into my usual het-up state about it. Not that I let the children see how anxious I was. I tried to be calm and responsible all the time I was with them, and that made me feel even more like going in raging hysterics afterwards.

Then something happened which again brought Nina's problems to the forefront of my attention.

It happened on the night of the dress rehearsal. In the morning the hampers of hired clothes had arrived, and stood, exciting and mysterious, in a dim corner outside Miss Gorrings's room. Dramatic Society members spent half the day going to peer at these delicious hampers, peeping through cracks in the basket-work and catching glimpses of colour and tinsel and a whiff of the cleaning material that all hired clothes seem to reek of when you first receive them.

The girls were all honour bound not to open the hampers. That would not be done until immediately before the rehearsal, when they would have half an hour to collect their clothes, commandeer places in the nearby classrooms which we had to use as dressing-rooms, and deck themselves in their finery.

As soon as afternoon lessons were over, all the members of the Society, whether they were in the play or not, converged on the dining-room, where a more splendiferous tea than usual was provided. It was noticeable that those without parts wolfed quantities of iced cakes and cream buns, while those with parts ate an occasional nervous biscuit, swallowed quantities of tea, and, according to their temperament, became flushed and excited or pale and silent.

After tea came the grand trek to the clothes-baskets. Silence fell as I opened the baskets and withdrew one by one the bundles

of garments, each tied neatly with string and clearly labelled. As I called out the name of the part, the girl who was playing it stepped forward and took her clothes. It was quickly done: 'The King, the Queen, Laertes, Hamlet, Horatio, Osric, Ophelia . . . ' and so on.

There followed the rush to the classrooms, the bagging of desks, the peeling off of crumpled blouses, thick tunics, baggy knickers, stringy suspender belts, lisle stockings, and the donning of doublets and hose, jackets and cloaks, wigs and plumed hats. Gradually, wonderfully, the sparrows turned into peacocks before one's eyes. Scruffy schoolgirls became handsome young men and women. Marian, in Hamlet's traditional black velvet, looked magnificent. She was keyed up to a high pitch of excitement and I wished her well with all my heart. On her performance, ultimately, rested the success of the play.

Nina had two dresses, a charmingly flowing gown in mauve and silver, which she would wear during her first scenes, and a tattered green dress for the 'Mad' scene. She put on the mauve dress and came running to me.

'Miss Eliot, what about my hair?'

I loosened the plaits and combed her soft, dark hair so that it fell over her shoulders. With her sensitive face, burning eyes and the hectic flush on her cheeks, she looked touchingly lovely.

'Do I look all right?' she asked.

'Absolutely right. You *are* Ophelia.'

'Yes, I *am* Ophelia,' she said. 'But I'm so scared.'

'You won't be once you start.'

'That's true,' she admitted. 'Even at rehearsals I die before I start, but once I've started I'm all right.'

'Come to the staff room to be made up, Nina,' I said, 'as you're ready.'

For the dress rehearsal I made up the principal characters myself, so that they should get accustomed to the feel of it. On the night of the performance we had a professional make-up man to do the whole cast.

As we went up the stairs I called back:

'All the people to be made up come to the staff room as soon as you're ready.'

'Yes, Miss Eliot'—'I'm coming'—'And me!'

The staff room seemed warm and gay compared with the classrooms. The electric fire glowed brightly. The chairs were comfortable.

'To think,' said Hamlet, subsiding into one of the chairs, 'that I repose on a chair on which so many imperial bottoms have sat before me.'

'A Worrell bottom . . . ' said the King.

'Or a Gent bottom . . . ' giggled the Queen.

'Sh!' said the wary Laertes, glancing in my direction, but I knew when to be deaf and didn't flicker an eyelid.

The making up was quickly done. They sat so still, were so obedient and helpful. As each girl was made up her friends exclaimed: 'Gosh, you're quite *pretty*!' except for poor Polonius, the old man in the play, who emerged from my hands with wrinkles and bags under the eyes. I cut short the poor girl's groans by saying:

'Never mind, it'll be even worse tomorrow. You'll have a beard. A grey one.'

'Oh, Miss Eliot, whatever will my boy friend say?'

'He'll be enchanted,' I promised. 'It isn't every young man who has a bearded lady.'

'He'll suggest putting me in a freak show,' she moaned.

'He could do that without a beard, sweetie,' said her bosom pal, and a short scuffle ensued.

'Get out of here when you're made up,' I said, visualizing my pots of cream and powder being sent flying. 'Go and sit in the hall till we're all ready.'

'May we see if there's anything left in the baskets?' asked the King.

'Yes, that's an idea. It *would* be disastrous if Rosencrantz and Guildenstern went on without their trousers.'

'Can I do anything for you here, Miss Eliot?' asked Marian.

'You can stay in the comfortable chair as you're Hamlet

himself,' I said, 'then you can help me collect my jars and bottles together.'

The last girl was made up, Marian and I tidied the muddle created, and she said:

'Don't we all look different in our fancy clothes and make-up?'

'You certainly do. I hardly recognize you.'

'Nina looks marvellous. You'd never dream she's only thirteen. She's got such an old look in her eyes sometimes. Miss Eliot, she's been so much better lately, hasn't she? Perhaps her father's coaching did some good after all.'

'He went on coaching her, did he, Marian? I thought perhaps he'd stopped. Nina never mentioned it to me lately.'

'She did to me. He's gone over and over the part with her every night, sometimes until past midnight. The poor kid must be tired out, but it's certainly shown results. She's a fine actress.'

'You're not so dusty yourself,' I said.

Her look of complete pleasure rewarded me.

'I shall never know how to thank you for giving me the part,' she said rather emotionally.

'My dear, no one else here could touch it. Don't you know that?'

She shook her head and said: 'I only know that I adore playing it. I've never been so happy as I have been this term, rehearsing it. I shall remember all this as long as I live.'

It sounded an exaggerated statement, but it was true. How vividly we do remember episodes of our schooldays, how intensely we feel things, more intensely than we can ever feel again.

'Now, let's join the others and get started,' I said. I opened the staff room door. We stepped into the silent corridor. And then we heard the scream:

'No! No! Don't! Get away! Don't!' Someone was screaming in terror.

I ran down to the hall at top speed, for the noise was coming from there.

Nina was cowering on the floor, sobbing hysterically. One of

the girls who had an unimportant part, but looked imposing in courtier's costume, was standing with a piece of rope in her hand, her expression bewildered and horrified.

'Nina, what's the matter?' I ran over to her, picked her up almost bodily and put her in a chair. I wiped her eyes and managed to calm her, but she couldn't speak for a minute.

'What happened?' I turned accusingly to the other girl.

'I was only playing the fool, Miss Eliot . . .'

'Yes, she was only fooling,' said someone else.

The girl held out the piece of rope which had been tied round one of the hampers and said:

'I just said: "So, me proud beauty, I'll teach you a lesson", or something like that—I was being a pirate, or something—and pretended to beat her with this. I didn't even touch her, Miss Eliot—I was just joking and she—she . . .'

'Perhaps,' I said furiously, 'you will behave yourself during the rest of the rehearsal. I will not have you all turning into a gang of hooligans and upsetting younger members of the cast. Is that clearly understood?'

It was harsh. Too harsh. There was complete silence.

'I'm all right now,' whispered Nina, still huddled in the chair. 'I'm sorry.'

I put my hand on her soft hair. 'Of course you're all right,' I said. 'You're on edge, child, that's all. We all are.' I gave a half smile at the others to show that all was forgiven, and the atmosphere lightened.

The rehearsal began.

Many things went wrong. Hamlet's father's ghost missed his cue, then his voice came from the wrong place. Polonius tripped over his robe and caused convulsive mirth where no mirth was required. Hamlet got so tied up in the middle of one of his soliloquies that it made no sense at all—not that the audience would notice that if it happened on the night. And the curtain kept sticking so that at the beginning of each scene all we could see were the not unshapely legs of the actors. Ophelia was a little subdued at first, but she managed well enough, and her 'Mad'

scene was superb, almost as if her recent hysteria helped her to act the part of a girl sick in mind.

At last it was over and they all gathered round me. I'd sent out for sandwiches and coffee from a nearby milk bar and we picnicked deliciously and untidily in the hall that had seemed chill and gloomy before we started. It was a gay, reckless scene, the tired, painted faces, the bright colours of the costumes, the sprawled legs, the rather grubby hands clutching cups of coffee and hunky sandwiches.

I said: 'If you do as well as that tomorrow night, without all the mistakes, you're going to be a rip-roaring success. None of you need do any homework tonight, of course.' A loud cheer rose. 'You need not arrive at school tomorrow morning before ten o'clock.' A louder cheer. There followed instructions about where to put their costumes and various other details. At last I said:

'Good night, and the very best of luck to you all tomorrow night.'

'Good night, Miss Eliot'—'Thank you, Miss Eliot.' Their voices rang out in jagged chorus.

I sat down, so exhausted that I felt I'd never move again. All I wanted was quiet and sleep.

Nina said a special 'Good night, Miss Eliot,' as she passed me, her face pale again now, the make-up wiped off, her eyes shy.

'Good night, Nina. Sleep well. And don't worry.'

As she stood there, as if unable momentarily to tear herself away, the shadow of one of the cords that hung from the curtain fell across her face.

It looked like the shadow of a whip.

8

THE night passed slowly. Tired as I was, I slept badly, dreaming hectically of the play, the things that might go wrong. I had a recurrence of that early dream in which I walked by moonlight

to the shores of a lake and was filled with nameless horror. I woke shuddering. At last I gave up all pretence of sleeping and had recourse to my usual black coffee, and cigarettes to while away the hours before dawn.

Morning classes passed like a dream. In the staff dining-room at midday there was the usual badinage.

'Well, how's the famous producer on the great day?' asked Miss Petal, mocking but kindly.

'How you can spend so much time with those kids after school beats me,' said Miss Lester.

'And why *Hamlet*?' asked Miss Worrell. 'I'm sure everyone would rather have *Murder in the Red Barn* or something equally jolly.'

'*Hamlet* has enough killings to satisfy the most bloodthirsty,' I protested, 'and a ghost and a suicide. You're all too lily-livered to take it, that's what's the matter with you.'

'Shakespeare's a pain,' said Miss Petal. 'Thank heaven I take maths. Eliot, eat your pudding. You look as if you need feeding up.'

It was no use. I couldn't eat. The heat and smells of the dining-room sickened me. I was nervous. Painfully, horribly nervous. No use telling me it couldn't matter less whether the play performed by a girls' grammar school was a success or not. No use saying 'It's all the same a hundred years hence.' With my mind I knew these things. I knew that nothing really matters and one day we'll all be dead. But my emotions betrayed me. My heart palpitated wildly. My hands shook. I went alternately hot and cold. I wished to God it were all over.

In the staff room after lunch Miss Worrell plied me with cigarettes and said: 'If you can't eat, at least you can smoke.'

'If I smoke much more I shall die of nicotine poisoning before the play even starts,' I gloomed. 'Oh, I'm so damned scared! *Hamlet* is too ambitious for us really. I wish I'd never taken it on.'

'Put your trust in Marian Clay,' said Miss Worrell. 'She's never flopped in a school play yet, and she won't start tonight.'

'That's true enough.'

'Then what's the trouble?'

'Nothing special. Just general funk.'

'And Nina Trent, perhaps?'

'Nina's all right. Although something happened at the dress rehearsal last night that upset me rather.' I told her of the incident of the rope.

'Nerves,' said Miss Worrell. 'Poor little girl.'

'You don't think it has any more significance than that?'

'What significance could it have?'

'I'm not sure, but there's something queer about it. You remember that time she fainted in your class? You said it was while you were talking of convicts being beaten, remember? There's a connection.'

'Nonsense. Are you suggesting that someone beats the child? I don't believe it. People who are beaten get scarred. Miss Gent sees all the girls stripped in the shower room after P.T. She'd have noticed anything like that quickly enough.'

'Yes, she would! I never thought of that.' I was filled with relief. Without my fully admitting it to myself, I had been imagining Nina being beaten by her father. Miss Worrell's sensible words dispelled that shadow of the whip. However much Nina's father frightened her, however harsh he was, he hadn't beaten her or we'd have known.

I took Nina's class during the afternoon. Her face was tight drawn and her cheeks were ashen. When someone dropped a book, she jumped so much that the girls laughed at her.

'First-night nerves,' they teased her, not unkindly.

I said: 'Never mind, Nina, I've got them too. We'll have to battle through together,' and she laughed with me.

At last the school day was over and we had three hours to fill in before the performance was due to start. The make-up man arrived, a small man with a black moustache and a slight foreign accent. He was established in one of the classrooms and the children were sent to him one by one. Deftly and without fuss he made them beautiful or ugly, old or young, according to his conception of the parts they were playing.

He made Marian unbelievably handsome—a truly dashing young Hamlet in black velvet. Nina became a creature of ethereal beauty—‘I change your make-up when you go mad,’ he said. ‘Not to forget.’ Polonius, grey-bearded and ancient, groaned with the stiffness of spirit gum on her chin. The Queen complained slightly of the few wrinkles etched on her plump face but enjoyed the red wig she had to wear. Gradually the little man in the white coat turned the group of children into a cast of players, and I was interested to notice that once they were dressed and made up they became less fearful. They acquired dignity.

The excitable ones were the children who weren’t in the play but had other duties. They bought cakes, lemonade and fruit and made sandwiches, which were placed in the dressing-rooms for the cast to eat when they felt hungry. They helped the others to dress. They peered through little holes in the curtain to see which parents had arrived. Some of them sold programmes in the body of the hall and thoroughly enjoyed wearing their best dresses for the purpose. Time sped by for some, crawled for others. To the cast, tense and quiet, it seemed endless. To those, like myself, with a myriad small jobs to do, it went too fast.

At last the noise in the hall told us that most of the audience had arrived. I looked at the people through one of the peep-holes.

Miss Gorringer was in the front row with two stout and illiterate-looking governors. Marian’s parents were just behind, the mother looking scared to death, the father smug. Next to them were Nina’s parents. Mr. Trent looked handsome and pleased with himself, smiling confidently round, scanning the audience with cold eyes that missed nothing. Mrs. Trent looked ill, much too thin and with great shadows under her eyes.

I prayed that Nina’s performance would please her father tonight. He had evidently coached her assiduously and he wasn’t the sort of man to brook failure.

The music teacher took her place at the piano and played a few nebulous pieces that wouldn’t interrupt the audience’s chatter. Other members of staff sat in the audience, looking slightly bored. They only came from a sense of duty. Amateur

performance[?] are unutterably boring to all but the performers and the unsophisticated. I chuckled to see Miss Worrell fumble for a cigarette, then remember that she mustn't smoke in the hall and look disgruntled. I laughed at Miss Lester's expression of cool boredom, and bet myself she'd slip away in the interval. Miss Petal was all right. She'd brought two long-suffering young men with her and was having a fine time distributing her favours. Miss Gent kept getting up and going to speak to mothers of pupils. She'd left off her ankle socks again. I was honoured, as indeed Shakespeare would have been had he known.

'It's five to seven, Miss Eliot,' said a quiet voice beside me. It was Marian.

'Zero hour,' I smiled. 'Sorry I haven't a rum'ration to offer you before you go into battle.'

She laughed, eyes shining, face radiant.

'I'm adoring every minute of it,' she said. 'I'm even enjoying being terrified.'

'Wonderful child! Is Nina all right?'

'Yes. She's taking it easy in one of the dressing-rooms. Don't worry. I'll look after her.'

How nice Marian was. At a time like this she thought of other people besides herself. Even as I thought that I realized that there is no greatness in unselfishness. Marian would never make a professional actress. She'd stand aside too often, kindly to let others go before her. Nina, for all her apparent fragility, for all her sensitiveness, her emotionalism, was the complete egotist. Her own feelings would always absorb her entirely. I wondered if the day would come when I'd see Nina Trent's name at the top of some theatre programme and say: 'I used to teach her.' It was a pleasant day-dream.

Now it was seven o'clock. The people in the first scene were ready in the wings. I gave the signal for the curtain to rise. It struggled up, jerkily, but without sticking fatally, and the play began.

After that it was out of my hands. I listened in the wings for a while, then, as my presence was no longer needed, went round to the back of the hall to watch.

There is something exhilarating about watching a play one has produced oneself, seeing the raw stuff one has handled emerging as something smooth and polished. There were faults, of course—they were only schoolgirls, for all their talent, all their intelligence—but they had captured the spirit of the play, they acted with fire and conviction. I was proud of them.

Marian, confident and handsome, put all her heart and soul into Hamlet. She gave a spirited performance, necessarily lacking in subtlety, but compensated by utter sincerity. Nina was perfect—lovely, innocent, frightened, fragile. The audience was particularly quiet during her early scenes. She had stage presence, a quality which seemed inborn in her. Her 'Mad' scene towards the end of the play was so realistic that it made even me shiver, familiar though I was with her performance. It was a wonderful piece of acting.

I glanced to where Miss Gorringe was sitting. She looked enthralled. I remembered her comments about giving a young child such a part and felt unkindly triumphant. Then I looked at Nina's father, expecting to see him glowing with pride.

His face was dimly lit by the light from the stage, but even so his expression was unmistakable. He was angry. Furiously, ragingly angry. His face was set in grim, cruel lines, and he was staring at Nina as if he couldn't endure the sight of her. His wife was sitting like a frightened statue.

My own nebulous fears for Nina were magnified a hundredfold. Why was her father so angry with her? What had she done? Too shaken to watch any more I went behind the scenes again.

The atmosphere there was different now. Fear and tension had gone. The girls were gay, relaxed, conscious of success. They took their entrances with confidence, they laughed together. They were happy.

When it was over, the audience applauded enthusiastically. Many of them, especially the children in the audience, had honestly enjoyed it. Some, no doubt, were just relieved. The chairs were hard.

The National Anthem was sung. The great day was over.

I went to congratulate Marian and found her already surrounded. I managed to speak words of praise to various others, then I went to the classroom dressing-rooms. In one of them Nina sat alone, huddled at a desk, her face buried in her hands.

'Nina,' I said.

She looked up, her face exhausted.

'Nina, you were wonderful. You gave me so much pleasure.'

She looked at me tensely. 'That was what I wanted to do,' she said. 'You really liked it?'

'I can't tell you how much.'

'Then that's all that matters,' she said quietly. 'That's all that matters.'

'My dear, of course it isn't! The whole audience thought you were fine. Your parents will be so proud . . .' My voice tailed away.

She gave me a sharp, strangely adult look, and said:

'Yes, they will be, won't they?'

'You're a credit to your father's coaching.'

She laughed, a high, uncontrolled sound. 'I didn't do anything he said. I went my own way, or did what you told me. He's coached me every night for weeks and weeks until I've nearly gone mad. I've obeyed everything he said while I was with him, then I cleared every word of it out of my mind when I performed here. I tried to do what he said at first, but I got in an awful muddle. It wouldn't work. He and I see Ophelia differently. Tonight's performance was *my* performance. Especially the "Mad" scene. He wanted it pretty-pretty. Sweetly mad. I couldn't do it. Madness isn't sweet and pretty. It's horrible and sinister. Ophelia's horrible in the scene for all her sweetness. She makes you shiver with pity and fear and dislike, because we all dislike mad people, even if we're sorry. I was right to do it the way I did. I don't care what happens. I was right. I *know* about acting. One day I'll—I'll show the world. And however famous I get, it will all be for you. All for you.'

The outburst was totally unexpected. She looked a different

person when she spoke so boldly and recklessly. Then, as she finished, the fire died out of her again, exhaustion returned, and she began to weep.

I was murmuring a few inadequate words of comfort when several other girls rushed in. Nina scrubbed away her tears and pretended to be removing her make-up. I was drawn into gay conversation with them all. 'Miss Eliot, my red wig went crooked just at a crucial moment. Did you notice?' squeaked the Queen.

'No, I didn't. I'm sure no one did.'

'Did you hear me trip over the carpet in the wings as I came on in the last act, Miss Eliot?'

'No, Laertes, not a sound. It must have been a quiet trip.'

'It sounded like an elephant clodhopping around to me,' said the girl.

'My sword got caught in the curtain'—'My eye make-up got in my eyes'—'I was eating an enormous sandwich when I had to go on—I hardly had time to swallow.' The babel grew deafeningly. The great peeling off of clothes began. Velvet doublets were cast aside for school tunics, wigs for flattened tresses. Cold cream was smeared over vivid faces, which now appeared hardly less vivid even with the make-up removed. Polonius fought with her beard—'It won't come off. I can't come to school in the morning with a beard. Miss Gent would have a fit. P.T. in a beard—imagine!' Noisier, noisier, more talk, more laughter, havoc, riot, joy.

I slipped away.

'It was wonderful, my dear. Magnificent. Congratulations,' said Miss Worrell as I entered the staff room.

'Same here,' said Miss Petal. 'I actually enjoyed it. Imagine enjoying amateur Shakespeare!'

'That child Nina Trent,' said Miss Lester thoughtfully. 'She may go far. I actually came out in goose-pimples when she went mad.'

'And wasn't Marian fine as Hamlet?' said Miss Petal. 'She's a charming girl.'

'Ophelia acted her off the stage,' said Miss Worrell.

'Oh no!' protested Miss Petal.

They began to argue vigorously.

Yes, it had been a success. But at what cost? I recalled the face of Nina's father as he sat, believing himself unobserved. Suddenly I was frightened. I sprang up and hurried to the hall. Most of the audience had departed. A few parents remained, waiting for children who had been in the cast. Mr. and Mrs. Trent were there.

I went up to them.

'Aren't you proud of Nina? Wasn't she good?' I said.

Mr. Trent gave me his charming smile and said: 'Let me congratulate you, Miss Eliot. A tremendous achievement.' He gave no hint of what our last interview had been like. He seemed to have forgotten it.

'Thank you so much,' I said, succumbing for a moment to his charm and flattery. I saw Nina approaching.

'Here she is,' said Mrs. Trent. 'Come along, darling. Home now.'

Nina was looking very small and defenceless. Other parents didn't recognize her as the beautiful Ophelia.

'I'm ready,' she said, and she looked at her father.

He smiled at her, a smile of the lips, while the eyes stayed hard as stones.

'We'll go home,' he said. 'Good night, Miss Eliot.'

'Good night,' I said.

I watched the three of them leave the hall. I was paralysed with fear. I almost shouted: 'Nina, come back!', almost moved to pursue them.

But I didn't. I stayed there like a fool, a scared, uncertain fool. When the door closed behind them, I ran forward, saying: 'Nina!' But they were gone. It was too late. Too late.

How often afterwards that last glimpse of the three of them was to haunt me, the upright little man with his strange aura of power, the delicate wife, the proud-faced little daughter. Nina had looked as if she were walking to the guillotine. And I, too cowardly, too conventional, had let her go.

9

NINA was late for school next day. She crept into my class like a little ghost, murmured: 'I'm sorry I'm late,' Miss Eliot,' and went to her place.

I just nodded in reply and continued with the lesson. Covertly I watched her. She was sitting very still at the desk, too still, as if she felt that only by keeping up this strange immobility would she be safe. She made no attempt to get out the books for the lesson. This might not be odd with some children, but with Nina it was. English was her favourite subject and she was normally alert to find the place in the book and answer questions. Today she just stared down at the desk, her long dark lashes showing up with startling blackness against the pallor of her face. I knew that something had happened. Something dreadful. Something she had spoken of to no one. She had come to school as usual, and, here, was hiding from reality too fearful to face. I felt sick with pity and apprehension. I must make an opportunity to speak to her at the end of the lesson.

Perhaps she anticipated questions from me, for as soon as the class was dismissed she hurried to the door with the others before I had time to speak to her. My next class filed in immediately. I taught them half-heartedly, Nina's haunted face still in my mind's eye. I didn't get the chance to see her at morning break as Miss Gorringer came to the staff room to congratulate me on the performance of the night before.

'I owe you an apology, too, Miss Eliot,' she said with her usual frankness and generosity. 'I was wrong about Nina Trent. She was perfect in the part. I saw her father too and he seemed very proud of her.'

'Not angry?' I said.

'Angry? Oh, no! Charming smile that man has. Even I, in my dotage, was susceptible to it. Nina has the same smile. Have you noticed? Fathers and daughters are often alike. She's inherited his acting ability and his smile—quite a legacy.'

'Did Mrs. Trent say anything?'

'Not a word. She seemed rather overawed by the whole affair. I tried to bring her out, but it was no good. What a mystery parents are! They're a different breed, you know.'

We laughed a little, and I thought how nice she was. She bore no grudge after the slight fracas we had had. Many head mistresses would not have been so quick to forgive and forget.

'Nina looks very unwell this morning,' I said.

'That's only to be expected. She must be tired out. If you'd like to send her home early, it's all right with me.'

'Thank you, Miss Gorringe. I'll be seeing her later.'

She left the staff room and the staff relaxed.

'I wish she wouldn't come in here during break when us girls want to take our back hair down,' grumbled Miss Petal.

'Most inconsiderate,' agreed Miss Worrell, 'I'd just got up to the murder in this book and I couldn't concentrate while she was here.'

'Grumblepatches!' drawled Miss Lester. 'You're lucky to have a Head like Miss Gorringe. You should have seen some of the old dragons I've worked under.'

'I like her all right,' said Miss Petal. 'It's just that Heads aren't human. They can't be, or they wouldn't be Heads. They put a natural damper on the proceedings, like some of those sea creatures who spew out clouds of something or other and make the air oppressive for all the other fish.'

'What are these mysterious fish that breathe air?' asked Miss Worrell.

'Don't be so pedantic. You know what I mean,' laughed Miss Petal.

Yes, we knew what she meant. A head mistress, however nice a person she may be at home with her feet up and her dignity laid aside, cannot be accepted naturally by staff or pupils. She is a lonely person. I never wanted to be a head mistress. The isolation would get me down.

In the lunch hour I determined to find Nina, ostensibly to tell her she could go home early if she liked, really to find out what had happened between her and her father the night before.

I looked in vain for her in the playground and on the field, in the washrooms and the cloakrooms. I found guilty little gaggles of girls hiding among the coats and heartlessly drove them out into the cold, healthy air.

'You want us all to die of pneumonia, Miss Eliot'—'If we turned into icicles, you wouldn't care'—'You don't even give us a hot-water bottle to hug'—'The staff huddle round a fire in the lunch hour, yet we're driven out into the Arctic.' They groaned and grumbled and giggled, and I rather wished I were one of those teachers who inspired instant respect and whom no child ever answered back. But how dull that would be!

'Out,' I said firmly. 'By the way, have any of you seen Nina Trent?'

Nobody had. They offered to search the school building—any excuse to stay indoors—but I would have none of it.

I searched the classrooms on the top floor.

And I found Nina.

She was huddled in a corner at the back of one of the rooms. It was strictly forbidden for the children to be up there in the lunch hour, but she gave no sign of guilt when she saw me. She looked as if she were beyond remembering anything so unimportant as school rules.

'Nina, what are you doing here?' I asked gently. 'Aren't you well?'

'I'm all right.' Her voice was flat, expressionless.

'You're not all right. Something's wrong. Tell me what it is, Nina. I'll try to help.'

'No one can help me. No one.' Her stony expression changed. Her face crumpled into ugly lines of weariness and grief. She gave a tearing sob and covered her face with her hands. I put my arms round her and held her close. She pressed against me desperately, her fingers gripping my arms so tightly that I almost gasped with pain. As she sobbed, I said nothing, just stroked her hair and felt my own fear and distress mounting.

At last she stopped crying, drew away from me and muttered: 'You must think me a fool.'

'Never that. But if you'll tell me what's the matter . . .

'I've almost killed my mother, that's what's the matter,' she cried. 'Deliberately, knowing what I was doing, I almost killed my mother. I can't bear it! I can't go on! I can't! If my mother dies, I shall be to blame!'

10

'NINA, tell me everything. Try to keep calm, and tell me.'

The little girl began to speak very quickly:

'It was my fault. I knew it would happen. But the part meant everything to me. I didn't care about anything else. I didn't let myself think of the future. I lived for Ophelia, and for your—your praise. Now Ophelia's gone. Finished. Drowned. It's all over. And my mother—it's as if I did it to her myself. . . .'

'Did what, Nina?'

'All right, I'll tell you. I can't hide it now, anyway. There'll be no more secrecy, no more pride. Only shame. It'll be in the local papers. Perhaps even in the daily papers. The ones that go in for that sort of things,' she added with contempt. 'People read about it and get a kick out of it. Some people make jokes about it. Once I heard a man in a bus say: "I only beat my wife on Fridays. It's enough to keep her in order." He and his friend laughed, as if things like that were a joke and didn't really happen. But they do happen, Miss Eliot. It's been happening in my home for years and years. Oh, how I hate my father! How I hate him! When I'm big enough I'll take that whip and beat him and beat him until he can't move or speak. I'll—I'll . . .'

She stopped, gasping for breath.

'Stop that,' I said firmly.

'You don't want any more? I don't blame you. You can read it in the papers, quietly, after your Sunday dinner. Like all the others. Oh, I'm sorry—I didn't mean that—I know you're different—different from anyone I've ever known—you're the only person I've ever loved. I do love you so—I do . . .'

'Then tell me the whole truth. Love's not much without trust, Nina.'

'For as long as I remember, he's beaten her,' she whispered. 'When I was little I didn't understand. I knew that some nights she'd cry out and I'd be frightened and hide under the bed-clothes. Sometimes after those nights she'd stay in bed next day. But we never had a doctor. It didn't happen so very often. Or perhaps it did. Perhaps it's just that when you're young time goes so slowly. Remember how the time from one Christmas to the next seemed like a century when you were little? In between, I'd forget about it, or make myself pretend to forget. He could be gay and kind. We'd go on outings. He'd make me happy, say he loved me. But always underneath I was afraid of him. I knew he did something horrible to Mother in that room at night. I shut my eyes and ears to it.'

'About three years ago I knew what really happened. I found the whip. He kept it in one of his drawers. I was putting his clean clothes away for Mother, and there it was, at the back of the drawer, under his socks. I knew then what he did to her. I read cases in the papers about men who beat their wives. It was happening in my own home. They never mentioned it. But I knew.'

'Do you remember that time I came to school with a black eye, Miss Eliot?'

'I remember.'

'When I told you my father did it, it was true. He didn't mean to. What happened was that I heard that—that queer swishing sound, there's no sound quite like it—and her stifled cries. I went to listen outside the door. For once he'd forgotten to lock it. I almost ran away, beastly little coward that I was—still am, I suppose—but I made myself in.'

'She was lying on the bed. Biting the pillow to keep herself from screaming. He—he—I can't describe the look on his face. I hardly recognized him. He had the whip in his hand, raised above his head. I rushed at him and tried to get it away from him. He was startled and struck me, hitting my eye hard. He'd never hit me before. Then he got hold of me bodily and took me back

to my room. After that there was complete silence. I lay there awake all night, too terrified to move. There's nothing so horrible as silence and darkness and fear. It's stronger than hate or love or anything. When you're afraid you aren't yourself any more. You're like an animal.

'He didn't beat her again for several weeks after that. He was sweet as sugar to both of us—sickly as sugar—loathsome! He's mad. I'm sure he's mad. Then he began to coach me for Ophelia. When I argued with him about the part, he'd get furious. I noticed that when I displeased him, he'd take it out on Mother. That time she was so ill and I stayed home to look after her, when he wouldn't let you in, she was in bed because he'd beaten her the night before. He'd beaten her because I made him angry.

'So after that I did everything he said when he coached me. And I came to school and did it all quite differently, the way you wanted it, the way I wanted it myself. I knew that when he found out he'd go crazy with rage. I didn't care. I was so determined to play Ophelia right I didn't let myself think of the future, of the dreadful going home after the play was over.

'Last night, when we got home, he was shaking with rage. His face looked dreadful. He'd put on an act for Miss Gorringer and you, but Mother and I knew. He was working up for an attack. We were so frightened. You can't imagine what it's like to be so frightened. He sent me straight to my bedroom without a word, and he and Mother went into their room.

'I sat there, listening. Then it began. The swishing. The whistling noise. Then the crack. It went on and on. I nearly went crazy. I didn't know what to do. I prayed and prayed that it would stop. I prayed to God to punish me instead, because it was my fault. Then I couldn't stand it any longer. I went to the door and beat on it and shouted and screamed. The whole house was roused. The sound of the whip went on. One of the men from downstairs came and broke the door down. I rushed in. Father turned on me. I felt the whip for the first time, on my wrist. The pain! Then they dragged my father away, the whip still in his hand. He was laughing. Laughing like this.'

She flung back her head and laughed quietly, cruelly. It was a piece of acting so convincing that I shuddered.

'Mother was unconscious. At first I thought she was dead. I covered her up—her body—the wounds. Someone sent for a doctor and for the police. When the doctor came they took my mother to the hospital, and the police took my father away. No one took any notice of me so I ran away from the house. I ran and ran in the streets while it was still dark. I like the dark streets. Secret, soothing. You can hide in them and no one knows you're there and who you are. You needn't be anyone at all if no one knows who you are. You're free. Then when it was morning I went on walking until it was time to come to school. I got lost in the back streets. That's why I was late. Now I don't know where to go or what to do. I wish I were dead. I wish I could drown myself like Ophelia. She knew what it was to see someone who could be kind and wonderful turn into a madman before her eyes. She knew what it was to be frightened. She took the best way out. I wanted to drown myself last night. I went to the canal and looked down at it. But I hadn't the courage. I faked it. Perhaps if there had been a lovely stream—and a willow—showing its hoar leaves to the glassy stream, I might have—I might . . . Oh, Miss Eliot, I feel so ill. I can't bear any more.'

She collapsed over the desk and began to weep again. The sleeve of her blouse fell back from her painfully thin arm. I saw the weal, savage, ugly, red, on the white skin. And for the first time in my life I knew what it was to hate.

† 11

THE bell rang for the beginning of afternoon classes. Nina stopped crying almost immediately. She scrubbed her eyes vigorously and said: 'I don't want anyone to see me like this. All the girls will be up in a minute.'

'I'll take you to the sick-room,' I said. 'Come along.'

She kept very close to me as we hurried down the corridor. A bevy of girls rushed past us. They gave Nina a shocked glance. As she ran the last few yards to the sick-room, like an animal running for cover, I heard a whispering among the girls: "Mum told me in the lunch hour"—"Her father . . ."—"Black and blue she was"—"Screaming like a madman"—"Who'd have guessed it?"—"Her father . . ."—"Her father . . ."—" . . . prison . . ."—" . . . hospital. . ."—"My dad knows him a bit"—"She always seemed odd." Momentarily I saw them as a gaggle of old women gossiping in a street, heads nodding, eyes shining, lips working.

"Stop that chattering in the corridor," I said sharply. "Go into your classrooms. Alison, will you find Miss Gent for me, please, and ask her to come to the sick-room?"

"Yes, Miss Eliot."

The long-legged child ran off obediently.

The curtains of the sick-room were drawn. Perhaps the last inhabitant had been suffering from a headache. Nina was hunched there in the gloom.

"Miss Gent will be up in a minute," I said. "She'll give you something to make you sleep for a while. You need rest more than anything else."

"I won't be able to sleep."

"Yes you will. Now, feet up, this cushion behind your head."

She was obedient, but she gave me an almost pitying look. Did I think a little sleep would put everything right? Had I really understood so little?

She looked pitifully small on the couch in the dim room. The very sight of her filled me with an agony of anger and frustration. That such things should happen! That life could be so evil!

"Oh, Nina," I said, "everything will be different one day. All this will pass. One day you'll be free and grown-up and all this will be like a nightmare, something you lived through, but which will in time become unreal. The past *does* become unreal, however horrible. One remembers, but as if it all happened to a different person."

"But what am I going to do? Where am I to live?"

'Haven't you any relations?'

'Not that I know of—and I'm not going back to that house. I'm never going near that house again as long as I live! Never! Never! I'd sooner lie on the pavement all night. Couldn't I stay here? I don't see why anyone would mind. This is a nice little room. So quiet. I love the school, Miss Eliot. Nobody hurts you here. Everything's—in order. You know what's going to happen next. It's settled. Safe. I'd like to stay here.'

'My dear, it wouldn't be possible.'

'No. Nothing one really wants is ever possible,' she sighed. 'If you do get what you want, something horrible hits back at you for it. I got Ophelia, didn't I?'

'Nina, if it's any consolation to you, I shall never forget your Ophelia.'

Suddenly she smiled. That beautiful smile in her plain, swollen, tear-smudged face.

'Thank you,' she said.

Miss Gent bustled in.

'What's the trouble? Nina again? You're becoming quite a regular customer, you poor child. Did you faint again?'

She looked at the child with her kind, observant eyes. Nina said nothing.

'She's had a shock. She needs rest and sleep,' I said.

'She certainly does. Poor little Ophelia! All the excitement's been too much for you, is that it? You highly strung actresses!'

I left Nina in Miss Gent's efficient hands and hurried to Miss Gorringer's room. I knocked, but there was no reply. I opened the door and looked in. She ought to be there. This was her afternoon for seeing parents.

'Miss Gorringer,' I called, thinking she might be in her little washroom. Silence. I looked into the secretary's room.

'Where's Miss Gorringer, Miss Burton?'

'Isn't she there? Well, I don't know where she is, then, Miss Eliot. She ought to be here. The parents will be arriving soon. Oh dear, managing a head mistress is more difficult than managing hundreds of children!'

Miss Burton shook her big head on its long, thin neck so vigorously that it looked dangerous.

'Never mind, Miss Burton. I'll find her.'

As I emerged into the corridor again, the door to the front lawns swung open. It was raining outside and Miss Gorringe burst in, her hair and suit wet, a streak of mud on her face, and in her arms a tiny ginger kitten.

'I saw it from my window,' she said. 'It was on the lower branches of a tree and frightened to death, poor little creature. I hope to goodness no one saw me. I don't look at my best climbing a tree, but I had to get it down. I've no idea whom it belongs to. It's so wet!'

She hurried into her room. Nothing else mattered to her but the kitten at this moment. She didn't seem to mind when it clawed wildly at her suit.

Miss Burton came in.

'Miss Gorringe, the parents . . .'

'They'll have to wait, Miss Burton. I want a saucer of milk, please.'

When she spoke like that, there was no point in protest. Miss Burton rushed off. Miss Gorringe put the kitten before the electric fire and knelt beside it. The little thing was shuddering. She stroked it and murmured to it, quite oblivious of my presence, the queue of parents growing outside and the indignation of her secretary.

I had never liked her so completely as I did at that moment. This, surely, was the real person, not the head mistress. A woman who, regardless of appearance and comfort, went out into the rain and climbed a tree to rescue a kitten. Gradually under her kind, firm fingers the kitten began to purr. It was an astonishingly loud noise. Miss Gorringe looked up at me, smiling.

'Isn't it sweet?' she said, her strong face strangely gentle. Seeing her like that reminded me of a time when I'd seen a crowd of workmen watching baby ducks on a pond. There'd been some tough types among them, but on each rough-hewn

face was that gentle, touching expression. A woman nearby had said to me:

'Makes you realize there's some good in the world, doesn't it?' I'd said 'Yes' to this simple statement, and meant it.

Miss Gorringe rose to her feet and caught a glimpse of her wild hair and muddy face in the mirror.

'Oh dear!' she said. 'I must tidy up before I see anyone. Will you look after the kitten, Miss Eliot?' and she dived into her little washroom.

I heard the running of taps, the crackle of her crisp dry hair as the comb passed through it, then the short and perfect silence that betrays the fact that a woman is putting on her lipstick—not that Miss Gorringe wore much.

Miss Burton came in with a bottle of milk and a saucer.

'Such nonsense,' she murmured, looking cross, then she knelt by the kitten and on her face too came that gentle, vulnerable look.

'It's rather a lamb,' she said unbiologically as she poured milk into the saucer, and the small pink tongue emerged and began avidly to lap the milk.

The kitten flung almost as much milk on to the surrounding carpet as down its gullet, but seemed to enjoy itself hugely. Every time it paused in lapping it gave a loud purr, then returned to its victuals.

'I hope you aren't going to keep Miss Gorringe talking,' said Miss Burton, rising and looking at me sternly.

'I'm afraid I am. I've something very important to tell her.'

'But the parents are waiting. Oh, Miss Gorringe,' as the head mistress emerged again, 'the parents . . .'

'Just give me five minutes,' said Miss Gorringe.

When we were alone again but for the gorging kitten, she said: 'Did you want me for something important, Miss Eliot? I'm rather busy just now.'

'It's about Nina Trent,' I said. I told her all that Nina had told me. Miss Burton poked her head in and said: 'Miss Gorringe, the parents . . .'

Miss Gorringe turned on her quite fiercely:

'Please do not interrupt like that,' she said. 'The parents must wait.'

'I'm sorry, Miss Gorringe.' The poor woman ~~repeated~~

'Go on, Miss Eliot,' she said, her face haggard now.

I finished the sad, sordid story.

'Horrible,' she shivered. 'I can hardly believe it.'

'It's true. The news is even getting round among the girls. I heard them talking.'

'So you were right, Miss Eliot. You knew there was something wrong.'

'Yes, I knew. I can't forgive myself for doing nothing.'

'Don't waste time on futile emotions,' she said impatiently. 'The point is, what are we going to do? Where can the child go? Has she any relatives?'

'No. People like that would obviously break contact with relations.'

'I suppose it'll be a case for the probation officer,' sighed Miss Gorringe.

'Oh no!' I couldn't bear the thought of Nina being passed from one impersonal hand to another, as if she were the unwanted parcel in a game of musical parcels. 'Miss Gorringe, can't I take her home with me? I have a little spare room in my flat that I sometimes use for visitors. I'd be glad to have her.'

She frowned. 'It's kind of you, but . . .'

'But what? She likes me. She'll feel safe with me. It's the best solution. The only one.'

'It's never a good idea for a teacher and a pupil to be too friendly. It causes bad feeling among both pupils and staff.'

'But in this case—a case of emergency—think of the child herself, not in terms of some cold-blooded principle.'

'You don't mince words, do you, Miss Eliot?'

'I feel partly responsible for all this.'

'That's foolish of you. If the business hadn't come to a climax now it might have dragged on for years and years. Perhaps it's a good thing for Nina's sake that last night did happen. At least

we'll see that she never gets into the hands of that man again. Nor will her mother if she's got a grain of sense.'

'Then I can take Nina home with me?'

'We'll ask Nina,' said Miss Gorringe. 'She's thirteen. She's going to have to be pretty independent from now on, by the look of it. She can decide. She's in the sick-room still, I suppose?'

'Yes, asleep, I hope. Miss Gent was going to give her something to make her sleep.'

'Quite right. We'll see her together at the end of this afternoon, then, and if she'd like to go with you, as a temporary measure, she shall. All right?'

'Yes, thank you, Miss Gorringe.'

The kitten gave a sudden squawk. It felt it was being ignored. Miss Gorringe picked it up.

'Oh, *what* a fat little stomach!' she whispered to it. 'Do you think it's had too much milk?' she added concernedly.

The kitten purred enthusiastically, and we both laughed.

'Oh dear,' said Miss Gorringe. 'The parents. I'd almost forgotten them. I hope they won't mind sharing my attention with a kitten for once. Will you tell Miss Barton that I'm ready, Miss Eliot? And slip up and see if that poor child's all right.'

'Yes, Miss Gorringe.'

As I was on my way back to the sick-room Miss Petal burst from one of the classrooms.

'*There* you are!' she said. 'Your class is kicking up merry hell next door to me. Can't you do something about it? I can hardly hear myself teach!'

'That should be a relief for everyone,' I said.

She pulled a horrible face at me and returned to her class. I went into my own class and played the usual disciplinary trick of standing before them without saying a word until the silence was complete. Then in icy tones I set them work and told them not to make a sound for the rest of the period as I was busy elsewhere.

I shut the door on them and left. With luck they'd stay quiet for ten minutes.

All was quiet in the sick-room. Nina was sleeping. As I looked

at her, small, helpless, battered by circumstance, my eyes filled with tears. Gently I stroked her hair from her brow. Faintly, in her sleep, she smiled. I went out of the room and closed the door.

The bell which rang for the end of afternoon school must have wakened Nina, for when I went to her she was sitting alertly.

'Nina, Miss Gorringer wants to see you. We're going to her together.'

'What does she want?'

'You'll see. Don't look so scared, child.'

'Scared? Of Miss Gorringer? Oh no,' said Nina. 'I like her.'

Miss Gorringer was waiting for us. She was very gentle with Nina, asked her if she felt better, told her the name of the hospital where her mother had been taken—she had evidently been making inquiries—suggested that Nina might go to see her mother during visiting hours this evening, but didn't press the point, then said:

'Now, Nina, there's this question of where you're going to live.'

'Can't I stay at school, Miss Gorringer? I could sleep in the sick-room. I wouldn't make any noise or disturbance or anything.'

'I'm sure you wouldn't, Nina, but I can't have anyone sleeping here except the caretaker. It's against regulations.'

'Oh, I see. Never mind, then. I'll manage.' She looked proudly.

Vulnerably proud.

'Miss Eliot wonders whether you'd like to stay with her for a while.'

Nina turned to me, eyes wide, mouth open.

'At your house?' she gasped.

'Flat,' I corrected her. 'It's rather poky, but I think I could fit you in.'

'Well, Nina, would you like that?' said Miss Gorringer.

Nina's eyes brimmed with tears. For a second her lips shook so much that she could hardly speak. Then she whispered:

'Like it! I'd like it more than anything else in the world! It's like a dream!'

'Then that's settled,' said Miss Gorringer. 'You'd both better be off home.'

We were dismissed. I took Nina's hand. She squeezed mine convulsively. I glanced behind at Miss Goringe as I went. She stood by the window, staring out. Her loneliness struck me forcibly. This must happen to her every night. Everyone went home, to husbands, parents, someone. But she stayed here alone for a while, then went home alone. I saw her bend to pick up the stray ginger kitten, which had now emerged from her washroom. She pressed it close to her. Her face, so stark and serious a moment before, became exquisitely tender.

12

A VISITOR always feels out of place at a hospital. It is like entering a large but intimate club, full of secret signs and smells. There is something about the very atmosphere that makes the heart-beat a little more rapid, the mouth a little dryer. The youngest nurse in her neat uniform fills one with awe.

It was dark when Nina and I approached the hospital where her mother lay ill. The child was very quiet as we walked along together, then she stopped to look at a barrow of flowers outside the main gates. The little man in charge, chafing his red-blue hands as he worked, was doing brisk business with hospital visitors. The visitors themselves, pale-faced, anxious-looking, all ages, shapes and sizes, straggled untidily through the big gates, clutching their floral offerings, then scattered purposefully towards the various sections of the hospital. Most of them seemed to be 'regulars'.

'Shall we get some flowers, Nina?' I asked.

'I haven't any money.'

'I have. What would you like? Anemones?'

'Oh yes, I love anemones. Mother loves them too.' Her voice was tense, her face stiff.

I gave her the money and she bought two bunches of fresh cool little flowers with their mysteriously curling stems and delicate

leaves. They looked small and humble in the flower-seller's hands, but when Nina took them and held them close to her face they took on an extra significance. I was reminded of Ophelia distributing her flowers—'There's fennel for you, and columbines: there's rue for you: and here's some for me: we may call it herb of grace o' Sundays: O, you must wear your rue with a difference. There's a daisy: I would give you some violets, but they withered all when my father died . . .'

'I love the white ones,' she said, 'and the mauve.'

She smiled up at me, small white face above the vivid flowers. I felt a surge of protectiveness towards her. I wanted to take her far away from hospitals and schools and gossip and shabby streets—I wanted her to be happy. But I had a feeling deep down that Nina would never be happy. She seemed fated.

'They'll open up more once they're in water,' I said.

'Oh yes,' she agreed. 'They'll last, too. You can make anemones last a whole week, even longer sometimes.'

We went through the gates. Just inside was a lodge where a man in uniform was answering inquiries. We asked where we could find Mrs. Trent.

'Trent—Trent . . . ' He looked through his list, read the entry opposite the name, then gave Nina a sympathetic glance.

'You her daughter?' he said.

'Yes,' said Nina. 'I suppose you don't know how she is?'

'No, miss. They don't tell me things like that. But I'm sure she's all right. Ward Four.'

The wards were opened to visitors at seven o'clock. We were a little too early. Outside Ward Four was a group of people quietly waiting: shy young men with bunches of anemones, like Nina's; motherly women with fruit and paper bags, probably containing some of 'Mum's home cooking'; men who looked as if they'd put their collars and ties on specially for the occasion; a couple of subdued children with a white-faced father. It was a sad, shy little group, shrinking back a little as nurses flitted confidently past.

At last a red-cheeked, ample-waisted nurse came out of the ward and flung the doors open.

'You can go in now,' she said.

Most of the visitors made a bee-line for the right bed. Nina and I hesitated. The ward seemed very bright compared with the dim hall outside. As so often happens in hospital, many of the patients looked a lot healthier than the visitors. Encoffered in their white beds, pink-checked, expectant, they were the hostesses, we the nervous guests.

'Where is she? I can't see her,' said Nina desperately.

We seemed to stand alone in the middle of the ward, cynosure of all eyes, for a long time. Then Nina left my side and almost ran across to the bed in the far corner.

The occupant was lying down. I saw a small, yellowish face on the pillow, one cheek marked by a livid bruise. It was Mrs. Trent.

I gave the child a few minutes alone with her mother before I joined them, then the woman smiled painfully up at me and said:

'Miss Eliot. How good of you to look after Nina for me. She's just been telling me she's going to stay with you till I'm better.'

'That's right, Mrs. Trent. You've nothing to worry about as far as Nina is concerned. I'll take great care of her. Or, rather, we'll take care of each other, won't we, Nina? I've a feeling Nina is more sensible in many ways than I am.'

'She's a good girl,' said Mrs. Trent.

'Oh Mum!' protested Nina, blushing. She changed the subject by thrusting forward the flowers: 'These are for you.'

'How lovely! Thank you, darling.' The woman's thin hands emerged from the bed-clothes to take the flowers. Then she turned to me and said: 'I wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed the play, Miss Eliot. It was wonderful. We used to do Shakespeare when I was at school, but it wasn't a bit like that.'

'I'm glad you enjoyed it. Nina had a big share in its success.'

'Oh Mum,' cried Nina, 'I should have done it the way Father said. I should have! I should!' She gave a little choking sob.

'You did it your own way and you were right,' said Mrs. Trent, her mouth grim in her battered face. 'Always be true to yourself. Isn't that right, Miss Eliot?'

'Yes,' I said, 'quite right.' And I thought how brave she was,

talking calmly of the play, praising her daughter's performance, when that very performance had brought her into this hospital.

She said: 'Nina love, there's a girl in the bed over there who hasn't any visitors. She's a nice young girl. Comes from Ireland. Doesn't know anyone over here. I've been telling her about you, what a lovely actress you are, and I promised to send you over to have a talk with her if you came to see me. Will you do that while Miss Eliot and I have a chat?'

'Oh Mum, need I?' Natural schoolgirl shyness with strangers overcame Nina.

'Go along, love. You'll like her.'

Nina gave a small grimace, but went. I saw her approach the bed where a pretty, dark-haired girl sat trying to look as if she didn't mind not having any visitors when everyone else had. Then I turned back to Mrs. Trent.

'Tell me quickly,' she said, 'what have they done with him?'

'He was arrested. I don't know what's going to happen, but I should think he'd be tried for assault.'

'And then?'

'It depends on the magistrate who tries the case, Mrs. Trent. He may only be fined. He may get a prison sentence.'

'The shame of it!' she said. 'All these years I've tried to keep it secret. I didn't want people gossiping about us. It's so bad for Nina.'

'I can't understand why you didn't get police protection years ago. Why did you put up with it? Why didn't you leave him?'

She smiled ironically. 'A lady like you, earning good money, has more freedom than someone like me. It's not so easy to leave a man when you're married to him and have a child to support. You've got to live. He never made much money, but when he did he wasn't mean with it. And he was all right between his—his attacks. Only when the madness took hold of him . . .' She closed her eyes.

'What you've suffered!' I murmured, sick with pity.

'It wasn't all suffering, my marriage.' She opened her eyes and looked straight at me. 'We had some happiness together, David

and I. He could be wonderful sometimes. It wasn't all his fault he had those outbreaks. Perhaps they were sort of inborn. And then when he was a child his father used to beat him. That filled him with hate for people and the world. He always wanted to take his revenge. I was the only person he could take it out on. I think he felt, when he hit me, that he was getting his own back for all he'd been through when he was young. Sometimes, when it was over, he'd cry. It's terrible to see a man cry. Once, when I threatened to leave him, he broke down completely. Said he couldn't go on without me. You see, Miss Eliot, when you've loved a man and promised to stick by him, "for better or worse", you can't just walk out on him because he's got some twist in his mind that makes him do dreadful things sometimes. He's still the same underneath, in spite of what he's done.'

'You're too good,' I said grimly. 'I can find no excuses for him.'

'There are always excuses for people. We're born the way we are. Don't let's talk about him and me. It's Nina who matters. I don't know what to do about her.'

'Mrs. Trent, she shouldn't ever have to live with him again.'

'No. You're right. But I don't know what to do.'

She closed her eyes again. Beneath the long, dark lashes, so like her laughter's, the tears trickled. She made no sound. Only the tears on her face betrayed her grief. I thought of the many times this woman must have wept in silence, suffered in silence. I had thought she was weak to stay with such a man. Now I saw how strong she was. The stuff that heroes are made of. The type of person who endures torture from an enemy without betraying a secret. I felt very humble with my comfortable background, my comfortable life, my personal freedom.

I glanced across at Nina. She was talking animatedly now to the Irish girl. They were laughing. That was how Nina always ought to look—gay, charming. Then, with a sense of shock, I saw that she looked like her father when he was out to charm. The attentive air, the lovely smile.

'Time now, everyone,' a nurse said. 'Everyone out'

'Me too, nurse?' called the Irish girl.

'You just try it!' said the nurse with a mock threatening gesture.

Nina laughed, then shook hands with the girl and returned to her mother.

'Goodbye, Mum darling. We must go now.' She bent over and gently kissed her mother's uninjured cheek. 'Get well quick!' she whispered.

'I'll be out for Christmas, you see!' said Mrs. Trent. She half sat up and her fingers gripped the child's arms for a second, then she fell back, exhausted.

'I'll be here tomorrow night,' said Nina. She turned and almost ran from the ward. I glanced back at the mother, who lay still, eyes closed. Now the excitement of the visit was over, she looked appallingly ill. Grey-faced. I wondered about the extent of the damage done to her fragile body. What horrors did the bed-clothes conceal?

Feeling suddenly weak and sick, I followed Nina out of the ward.

We neither of us spoke as we left the big, gaunt building. A steady drizzle was falling but we hardly felt it. The streets were quiet. The flower-seller had gone. Nina drew closer to me, then tentatively took my arm. I pressed her hand close against me with a reassuring gesture.

Nina said: 'Is she going to die?'

'Of course not. You heard what she said? She'll be out by Christmas. Then you'll be able to spend Christmas together.'

'She only said that.' Miss Eliot, I can't get her face out of my mind—I keep seeing it all the time . . .'

'I know,' I said gently. 'I know.'

'Do people go on seeing terrible things in their mind for ever and ever? Like a film that you can't get out of your head? Doesn't it ever go away?'

'Yes, Nina, it does go away. It does. Time fades it; then, very gradually, it goes away altogether.'

'I can't stop seeing last night. Over and over again. And her face now. It's as if it were stamped into my eyes. It's worse when I close my eyes. Do you know what I mean?'

'Yes, darling, I know.'

Of course I knew. Don't we all? Suddenly, I saw again, vividly as if it were there before me, the agonized face of my father before he died. And my mother's eyes open in death. And the young man I had loved shattered to pulp when a bomb fell in a London street. Pictures stamped into one's eyes. One thinks they will never fade. Long afterwards they do fade, for months, even years on end, then return suddenly, unexpectedly, bringing an uprush of all the old fears and griefs.

But a child should not have to face such things. A child should not have such pictures stamped on her eyes.

All I could do was press her hand close and warm beneath my arm and take her home.

At my flat we had boiled eggs, bread and butter, strong black coffee for me and strong almost-black tea for Nina. It was touching to see her drinking down the workman's brew of tea without turning a hair, and it was good to have company in my lonely flat. How wonderful it must be to have a daughter!

Only at bedtime did it dawn on us both that we hadn't got her night clothes.

'We're a fine pair!' I said.

'I'll sleep in my vest.'

'No need for that. You can borrow one of my nightdresses. Or do you prefer pyjamas? I have both.'

'Pyjamas,' she said, 'but I *couldn't* wear yours!'

'Why not?'

'I just *couldn't*!'

'You could and will. You'll probably be swamped in them, but they'll be more comfortable than a vest.'

I found a pair of pink silk pyjamas in my drawer, tossed them to her and said:

'Now you get ready for bed. Call out when you're in bed and I'll come and say good night to you.'

She was such a long time that I tiptoed along to the spare room to see what she was up to. She had put on my pyjamas, wrapping

them round her neatly and pinning them so they looked at a glance like a slinky evening dress. She was looking at herself in the mirror, her cheeks flushed, lips parted. Then, dramatically, she said to the mirror:

'Give me my robe, put on my crown; I have
Immortal longings in me: now no more
The juice of Egypt's grape shall moist this lip:
 Methinks I hear
Anthony call; I see him rouse himself
To praise my noble act; I hear him mock
The luck of Cæsar, which the gods give men
To excuse their after wrath. Husband, I come:
Now to that name my courage prove my title!
I am fire and air; my other elements
I give to baser life. So, have you done?
Come then and take the last warmth of my lips.
'Farewell, kind Charmian; Iras, long farewell . . .'

She broke off, sensing perhaps that she was no longer alone. When she saw me, she turned in a flash from an Egyptian queen into a little girl in overlarge pyjamas.

'So you know *Antony and Cleopatra*,' I said. 'You're quite a Shakespearian scholar, Nina.'

'It's a lovely play. Cleopatra's a wonderful part. I know it through and through. Couldn't the Dramatic Society do it next year, Miss Eliot? I could play Cleopatra.'

'Could you indeed? Modest little soul, aren't you?' I teased her. She laughed.

'Did that sound conceited? You see, Miss Eliot, I can act; I've always known it. It's the thing I can do. Should I pretend I can't do it?'

'Don't pretend anything,' I said. 'Just stay as you are. Now it's time you were in bed instead of admiring yourself in front of the mirror in those enormous pyjamas.'

'They didn't feel so enormous when I was being Cleopatra,' she said.

'Strangely enough,' I admitted, 'they didn't look it.'

'That's because I'm an actress,' she said. 'One day, Miss Eliot—you'll see . . . ' She was in bed now, looking at me alertly, forgetting her troubles for the moment.

'One day I shall sit in the stalls,' I said, 'and make a thorough nuisance of myself to everyone around by announcing: "I knew the famous Nina Trent when she was at school." I shall be very proud. Of course, I shall be ancient then and smelling of moth-balls.'

She giggled happily as she lay down, snuggling under the covers. In spite of the flush on her cheeks, the brightness of Cleopatra in her eyes, there were great shadows under those eyes and her face looked too thin.

'You need looking after, don't you?' I said. 'Good night, my dear. I think you'll sleep now. Call out if you need me.'

I touched her hair as a good-night caress, but she put out two strong arms, gripped me tightly round the neck and kissed me.

'Good night—my darling,' she whispered.

I turned away, the ache of tears pressing suddenly, painfully, behind my eyes.

13

WHEN I reached school next morning the staff room was alive with gossip. They seized on me like vultures as I entered.

'You know about it, Miss Eliot!'—'What happened to Nina Trent?'—'All sorts of stories are flying round'—'Is it true she's living with you?'

'Yes, she's living with me at the moment. Her mother's in hospital.'

'What about her father?' insisted Miss Petal. 'Come on, Eliot, don't hold out on us.'

'I may as well tell you. It's sure to be in the local paper anyway. Mr. Trent beat up his wife. Nina got help. The neighbours broke into the room. A doctor arrived and had Mrs. Trent taken to hospital. The husband was arrested. He'll be

in court in a few weeks' time. Nina naturally can't live in that house alone, and as they seem to have no friends or relatives, she's staying with me.' 'Is

'Poor little kid!' Miss Petal looked subdued. 'I do think it's kind of you to take her in.'

'I like having her,' I said truthfully.

'Of course you do,' growled Miss Worrell from her corner. 'You ought to have half a dozen of your own. So your worries about Nina turned out to be well founded?'

'Yes, I'm afraid so.'

'You mean you suspected?' said Miss Petal.

'I knew there was something wrong. I wasn't sure what it was.'

'That man!' said Miss Gent. 'He ought to be hanged, drawn and quartered. Nothing would be too bad for him.'

'He must be mentally ill,' said Miss Lester. 'I read up something about flagellation once . . .'

'About what?' said Miss Petal.

'Flagellation—whipping. Heavens, Petal, and you a school teacher!'

'Well, I don't whack the little dears,' she protested. 'And if you're criticizing my lack of vocabulary, remember maths is my subject. Who added up her terminal marks wrong last term?'

'*Touché!*' said Miss Lester. 'But to return to the point. The men who indulge in these practices are usually abnormal in other ways too. Mr. Trent's the man with the queer eyes, isn't he? I think I saw him on the night of the play.'

'Yes, he has got strange eyes,' said Miss Worrell. 'I thought so when I met him, but he was so utterly charming that I soon forgot about his eyes. Perhaps it was the same with his wife. The Devil, I believe, had enormous charm.'

'There's too much of this flim-flam about people being abnormal and not able to help themselves,' said Miss Gent violently. 'Too much psychiatry and not enough toughness. If I had that dreadful man here . . .'

'You'd treat him the way he treated his wife,' said Miss Lester. 'That'd be a lot of help to everyone, wouldn't it?'

'You can only meet violence with violence,' said Miss Gent. 'Give people a bit of their own medicine. If a man who beats his wife knows that all that will happen if he goes too far is an interview in a comfortable consulting-room and the baring of his soul before a psychiatrist, he'll go on doing it. But if he knows he'll get half beaten to death himself as a punishment he'll think twice.'

'But they don't *think*, people like that,' said Miss Lester. 'They act on emotion. Like mad people. What do you think, Miss Eliot? You know the Trent family better than any of us.'

'He's unbalanced,' I said. 'There's no doubt about that. I try to think level-headedly about him and understand that he's sick in mind. But I saw his wife in hospital. And I saw the mark of the whip on Nina's wrist. Those things make me loathe him as I've never loathed any man before. I'm afraid I'm too prejudiced to judge his case.'

'I expect the wife will go back to him when it's all over,' said Miss Petal. 'They often do. In some primitive tribes women don't consider a husband is a husband unless he beats her.'

'Some women are extraordinary . . . ' began Miss Gent.

They went on talking and talking. I sat at the table, my head blazing with pain, and wished with all my heart that they'd stop. Their fundamental indifference hurt me. They didn't really care. Why should they? We care about our own toothache more than about the death of a thousand Greeks in an earthquake.

The Trent case would make interesting table-talk for these teachers over Christmas: 'My dear, at the school where I teach . . . Terrible, wasn't it? . . . Anyone want more pudding? Oh, I've got the sixpence. . . ? Well, as I was saying, this dreadful man . . . '

How loathsome life was! *

Then my bitterness lessened as I thought of the sweetness of this morning, waking Nina, frying her egg and bacon, seeing her drink that terribly strong tea she doted on, making sure she cleaned her teeth—her indignant 'Miss Eliot, I always clean my

teeth! Well, almost always'—dashing out together to catch the bus, and her last:

'Oh dear! Now we've got a whole day of pretending I don't really know you. It'll take me all my time not to tell the girls I wore your pyjamas.'

'You may if you like.'

'May I really, Miss Eliot?'

What a queer mixture she was! One moment a child, with all the carefree selfishness of a child, fundamentally untouched by the happenings around her; another moment a woman, an actress, supremely ambitious and egotistical; another, a creature stricken with adult fear, grief and remorse. She was three different people.

But then all children are several different people at the same time. The circumstances of their lives shape their ultimate character, make them finally one person. David Trent had been a boy once, a boy with potentialities for good or evil. But David Trent's father had beaten the boy's body and warped his mind. David's eyes as he grew older had become cold and bright with hate. He could not, as a young child, have had such eyes. They were the legacy of spiritual death, not of physical birth.

I remembered that David Trent had at least never intentionally touched Nina. He had some compunction in that twisted heart of his: Perhaps in his own way he loved her. He was ambitious for her, and that was a sort of love, the possessive, egotistical love. What was he thinking now in his prison cell? No, his thoughts were beyond my imagination. I could not see inside the mind of such a man. He was a stranger to me. A stranger with a beautiful smile. And a corrupt heart.

'Eliot, that telephone's been ringing in your ear for nearly five minutes,' Miss Petal's voice broke my reverie. Dazedly I put out my hand to the receiver at my elbow on the staff room table.

'Hello, this is Miss Gorringe. Is Miss Eliot there?'

'Speaking, Miss Gorringe.'

'Bad news, I'm afraid.' Her calm voice went on for several minutes. As I listened I felt a chill pass through me and my hand

went so weak I could hardly replace the receiver in its cradle.

'Miss Eliot, what's the matter?' Miss Lester came over to me.

'It's Nina's mother,' I said. 'She died in hospital early this morning. Miss Gorrington wants me to send Nina down to her room when I go to my first class.'

A stillness fell upon them all. They stood like statues, ludicrous statues, Miss Gent half bending as she changed her shoes, Miss Lester with a toppling pile of books in her arms, Miss Worrell with a lighted match half-way to her unlit cigarette, the others in stiff, awkward positions, like people on whom Medusa has suddenly cast her petrifying eye.

Shattering the uncanny silence, breaking the tragi-comic tableau, the bell rang for the first class.

14

THE sun shone on the day of the funeral, but the air was cold behind its bright pallor. Nina and I went together. I felt that there was really no need for her to attend the grim ceremony, a ceremony which seems to have so little connection with the person one once knew and loved. Miss Gorrington indeed suggested to Nina that she needn't attend. Nina insisted. Her reason? An odd one, coming from such young lips, one that she must unconsciously be quoting from her mother:

'Of course I must go. What would people say?'

So we sat together in the back of a dark car and looked out on the world which still went about its everyday business.

'Doesn't it make you feel separate?' said Nina. 'I feel that if I got out of the car and walked among those people I wouldn't cast a shadow. All this seems so unreal. Do you remember Ophelia's funeral? When I was in the wings watching the coffin being carried across the stage I really felt as if the body of Ophelia were in it, and I was her spirit, watching, thinking what

fools they all looked, wondering why they were weeping and shouting all over the place. I wonder if Mother's thinking that now? It's all so queer. Oh, Miss Eliot, I must be a very hard, awful person!

'In what way?'

'All the books I've read about people dying make relations unhappy. They cry, and all that. But I don't even feel upset. I did love Mother. I really did. But all this doesn't seem to make me feel anything. Except a bit nervous. And even then nothing like as nervous as before the play. It's as if I hadn't any feelings left. Isn't it terrible?'

'No, it's natural. Most people feel like that at funerals, Nina, but they aren't always honest enough to say so.'

'Oh, I see.'

She relapsed into silence while the sun shone down on our black procession. A few people stopped as we passed. Some men removed their hats. An old Italian with a barrel-organ stopped playing his gay tune and crossed himself, while his monkey made faces at us. Children laughed and pointed. A little girl with her mother cried:

'Look! A wedding!'

Nina chuckled quite genuinely.

'Isn't that funny?' she said. 'I wonder if, when she sees a bride and bridegroom coming out of church she says: "Look, a funeral!" Imagine the bride's face!'

As we neared the church her laughter died.

'Look!' she said. 'Just look! It's my father!'

There was a crowd round the church, a crowd of people who had read of the Trent case and were morbidly interested. Standing at the door of the church, erect and proud of bearing, a policeman hovering near him, was David Trent.

'Why did they let him come? How could they?' cried Nina passionately. 'Look at him! The beast!'

'Nina, don't! It can't be helped.'

'I'll show him,' she said. Her cheeks were fiery, her eyes shone.

She looked vividly beautiful, not at all the conventional picture of a little girl at her mother's funeral.

We alighted from the car and made our way up the churchyard path. As we reached the door, David Trent put out his hand and said:

'Nina!'

She ignored him completely, swept past him as if she were a fairy-tale princess and he some villainous beggar in the gutter. I saw a newspaper cameraman shoot the cruel little scene. His expression was avid. Scoop! it said. Scoop! Scoop! You could see he'd be asking for a rise next Friday on the strength of it.

I had never thought I could feel pity for David Trent, but when he stepped back, his shoulders drooping, his mouth set in lines of despair, I felt that life had brought him its own punishment. That even-handed Justice . . .

The service was brief, almost hurried. Nina sat beside me like an avenging angel, her whole body throbbing with triumph at her revenge. I am sure she heard not a word of the service, gave not a thought to her mother. She was young and taken up with the grim excitement of life, not the nullity of death. I could almost feel David Trent's eyes staring at our backs as we sat there.

In the churchyard afterwards we stood blinking in the sunshine, which now seemed vulgar and inappropriate. There were few people round the grave. The crowd still lingered at the edge of the churchyard. When it was over, when the coffin had been lowered, the earth filled in, the father made another attempt to speak to his daughter. He broke away from the policeman's detaining hand and said:

'Nina—don't look at me like that—I didn't mean to do it—you'll understand one day—you're all I have now . . .'

She turned her back on him and walked towards the waiting car.

'Miss Eliot!' He seized my arm. 'Speak to her for me.'

'What can I say? What doesn't she know already?'

'Tell her—that her Ophelia was magnificent,' he said. 'And look after her. Please look after her.'

He turned to the policeman, nodded, and they strode off together towards the police car. As David Trent passed the crowd one or two women hissed. An urchin shouted 'Murderer!' An angry murmur rose. The man stiffened his shoulders and held his head high. His face was impassive now. His cold eyes stared ahead of him.

In that moment at least he didn't lack courage. I was finding it hard to go on hating him, in spite of everything.

'We'll go back to my flat,' I said to Nina once we were in the car again.

'I'd rather go back to school. Just as if nothing had happened.'

'Sure?'

'Yes. What did he say to you?'

'He told me to tell you that he thought your Ophelia was magnificent.'

'It's a pity he didn't make up his mind about that before. It's no good, Miss Eliot, I never want to see him or speak to him again as long as I live. If they hanged him for murder I wouldn't care.'

Her face was grim and unchildish. She seemed to have changed so much in the last few days. The transition from child to adult had come, not gradually, as it should, but suddenly, brutally. The child who had come to school with a black eye a few weeks ago was not the same person as the girl who sat in the car with me now, her mouth so bitter, her eyes so hard.

'Hatred turns on the hater in the long run, Nina,' I said. 'I know he did terrible things. I know he made you suffer . . .'

'And killed my mother. Don't forget that. You expect me to turn to him in loving kindness, like in the Bible, just because he puts on an act at the church? My father's an actor, remember. He doesn't care about me.'

'I think he does.'

'He cares about losing his power over me. That's all.'

She saw the truth too clearly. I was silenced.

The car passed through a busy shopping street. The shops were gay with Christmas decorations. Toyshops bulged with fairy dolls and toy trains, Teddy bears and miniature telephones, crackers and tinsel. A greengrocer's stall made a cheerful display with its tiers of oranges and lemons and a prim little row of Christmas trees. Turkeys and geese hung pathetically head downwards in butchers' windows. Enormous Christmas cakes, bright with silver 'snow', little Father Christmases and sprigs of imitation holly filled the pastrycooks' shelves. Sweetshops offered huge boxes of chocolates in fancy boxes, gay with crinoline ladies and stage-coaches. Stationers hung their windows with streamers of Christmas cards.

It was a cheerful display and a vulgar one. All remote from Bethlehem.

Nina said: 'Mother said she'd be out of hospital for Christmas. She was right, wasn't she?' Her voice broke and suddenly her face was drenched with tears.

I put my arm round her and held her close. I could think of no words of comfort. Her last childish illusions were gone. She'd looked into the face of reality, a face which, once seen, can never be ignored again.

'You're not fit for school. Let's go back to my flat after all,' I suggested.

'No.' She moved away from me. 'I won't give in. I'd rather go back to school. The lunch hour will just be beginning by the time we get there. If I can face school dinner I can face anything,' she added with a gleam of unexpected humour.

'Thank goodness it's breaking-up day tomorrow,' I said.

'It'll be funny not having anyone to show my report to,' said Nina.

This prosaic little remark moved me more than anything the child had ever said.

15

My classroom¹ was close and warm as I entered² on the morning of breaking-up day. On the whole children like a fug. It is among adults one finds the fresh-air fiends, the objectionable people who say:

'Poof! Isn't it close in here?' and heartlessly open windows and create draughts. That was precisely what I did.

'Oh, Miss Eliot,' groaned one of the girls. 'It's so lovely and warm in here and now you're spoiling it.'

'Lovely and germ-y too,' I said. 'We must have a window open. You'll probably all have bilious attacks after Christmas, anyway, but there's no need to have influenza as well.'

'I shall get pneumonia near that window,' muttered one little saucebox.

'All in a good cause,' I said sweetly, and she grinned.

How friendly they all were on the last day of term. It was as if, anticipating their freedom, they felt kindly even towards their warders.

'Miss Eliot, may I go and deliver my Christmas cards?' asked a plump child with fair plaits.

'And me, Miss Eliot'—'And me.'

'Yes, but don't be too long about it.'

The routine on Christmas breaking-up day was that the children arrived with satchels pleasantly bulging with cards and presents which they distributed among their friends. Often they had to go to other classrooms when acting as their own postmen. This involved an enjoyable rush all over the school, a privilege which only occurred at Christmas-time. At times it seemed that there were more girls tearing up and down the corridors with their little bundles of cards than there were in the classrooms.

By the time a dozen girls had dashed off to deliver their mail, I had only about twenty left in the class. With flushed cheeks and bright eyes they chattered to each other and opened their cards and presents. Soon their desks, usually dreary with pens, ink and

school-books, became gay with pictured cards, coloured wrappings, tinsel cord and red ribbon.

The commonest presents were handkerchiefs, bottles of scent, tablets of strongly perfumed soap, bath cubes, lipsticks and powder. Soon the room was fragrant as any beauty parlour. One or two girls retired surreptitiously behind desk lids to try out their new lipsticks, and I developed so many blind eyes and deaf ears that I became almost insensible. The children were not, of course, allowed to make up at school, but most of them experimented at the weekend to impress those curious creatures known as 'boy friends'.

One desk was more piled with gifts and cards than any other. Nina's desk. She had no close friends, as I had noticed before, and I was sure that no one had mentioned to her the horrors and tragedies that had befallen her of late, but they showed their quiet sympathy in the quantity of their gifts. How much more effective was this unspoken sympathy than any trite words could have been!

As Nina sat there quietly opening her presents, oblivious to everything else, she looked almost content. Once she looked up at me, and gave me a smile of such sweetness that I felt my own spirits rise. Surely the kindness of her schoolfellows would do more than anything to wipe out the hatred and anger that had the very day before deprived her of all other feelings!

I began to open my own cards, a formidable pile. There were crinoline ladies and bunches of flowers, snow scenes and plum puddings, dogs and turkeys, Van Gogh 'Sunflowers' and 'The Laughing Cavalier', all sorts and varieties of cards from the artistic to the atrocious. Among the cards were a few small parcels. I opened these with trepidation. 'Jewellery' was my bugbear. I usually found that during the term after Christmas I had, for the sake of youthful feelings, to wear some appalling brooch or necklace—even one term some 'pink diamond' earrings, given to me by a child with the heart of a lover and the taste of a vulgarian.

I had only opened my first two presents—a cake of very violet-scented soap and a small bottle of lily of the valley perfume—when a child brought me a message that Miss Gorrington wanted to see me.

‘I have to leave you for a minute,’ I said to the class. ‘You won’t go completely berserk in my absence, will you?’

‘We’ll be like mice, Miss Eliot,’ was the gay reply from one girl.

‘Oh yes, someone’s given me a little box of cheeses,’ said another. ‘We can sit and nibble.’

‘Good thing it isn’t gorgonzola or it’d follow Miss Eliot down the corridor.’

‘I shall expect you to keep it on a lead,’ I said severely.

Their laughter echoed behind me as I made my way to Miss Gorrington’s room.

She was sitting at her desk, a pile of unopened Christmas cards before her. The kitten was exploring these with a tiny, tentative paw, and she was watching it affectionately.

‘Oh, you’ve still got it!’ I said.

‘Yes, I’ve put a notice on the gate saying we’ve found a kitten, but no one’s claimed it. I hope no one does. I shall take it home for Christmas.’

‘Have you given it a name?’

‘Sabrina,’ she said, stroking the kitten. Immediately it gave a loud purr, arched its back endearingly, and waved its pencil tail in the air. There is nothing to compare with the touching, exquisite, delicate beauty of a kitten.

‘I wanted to talk to you about Nina,’ said Miss Gorrington. ‘Has she settled down all right?’

‘Yes, we get on like a house on fire. She’s no trouble.’

‘You enjoy having her?’

‘Very much.’

‘I’ve seen the probation officer about her. She is now “in need of care and protection”—explicit phrase, isn’t it? Unexpectedly human—I told the officer that you were willing to keep Nina with

you for a while, although it's unusual to leave a child with a single woman.'

'Why?'

'There are dangers. She might become too fond of you. However, the probation officer has agreed that Nina shall stay with you for the time being.'

'I'm so glad. I'll do my best to make her happy.'

'I know you will. I almost envy you. She's a dear little girl.'

'Not such a little girl any more. She's grown up in the past few weeks.'

'Yes,' she said, her face very sad, too sad. Then she became brisk. 'That's settled, then. The practical side of things—the flat they lived in and all that will be dealt with by the local authorities. You will receive a weekly sum of money. Not very much, I'm afraid.'

'There's no need for that.'

'Take it. It will make Nina feel more independent.'

'Oh yes, of course.'

We went over other formal details and at last Miss Gorrington said: 'Well, I hope you and Nina have a very happy Christmas, Miss Eliot. If anyone can help her to forget, it's you. Luckily her father's case will come up in court during the holiday, so she won't have to face too much gossip at school. How are the other children behaving to her?'

I told her about all the cards Nina had received.

'How kind they can be sometimes,' she said. 'That will help Nina more than anything. Oh, and there's something else. I've had a letter from the Waverley Hospital. It seems one of their doctors saw *Hamlet* done here the other week and brought back such glowing reports that they've asked if we'll do the play again on their premises one day next term. Could you manage that, do you think?'

'Certainly. The children will be delighted. I often think it's a shame that they only give one performance after all the hard work they put in.'

'Right. I'll fix a date, then, and let you know. Better tell the

cast before they go home for the holiday, then they can brush up their parts.'

My class was full again when I returned, and as I entered there was a sudden silence. What had they been up to? Some of them looked at me quickly, then down at their desks again, their faces shy, excited.

Then I saw it. An impressive parcel on my desk, wrapped in gay Christmas paper.

'Now what have you been up to?' I said.

They giggled and looked so mischievous that I had an unworthy fear that the thing might blow up when I touched it. Nothing of the sort happened. Beneath the Christmas paper were layers of tissue paper. I drew them aside to find a really attractive travelling clock, complete with leather case, twenty cigarettes and fourpence. With them was a card signed by everyone in the class and the message:

To Miss Eliot, with love from us all, hoping you have a very happy Christmas.

One never gets quite accustomed to such moments. Each year, of course, it happens. One's class gives one a present at Christmas-time. And each year I felt the same constriction of the throat, the ache behind the eyes, and my voice wasn't quite steady as I said:

'Thank you all so very much. It's a wonderful surprise. I shall always treasure it. It's very sweet of you all.'

The form captain spoke out: 'We hoped it'd be all right, but you can change it if you don't like it.'

'I love it. I wouldn't change it for the world.'

'We had some money left over when we'd bought it,' she went on eagerly, 'so we got the cigarettes; then there was still the fourpence left over, so we thought you'd better just have it as it was.'

'Nothing like giving teacher a fourpenny one, eh?' I said.

They roared with the laughter of relief. I thought how forgiving children are. There were people sitting before me now whom I'd

CHILD IN THE DARK

nagged about homework and made to do work over again and again, girls I'd put in detention and awarded bad conduct marks, girls I'd scolded, perhaps unjustly, because I'd happened to be in a bad mood, girls I'd commented on unfavourably at the end of their reports, but in no single face was there a sign of coldness or resentment. They bore no grudges. They wished me a happy Christmas. I felt very small and I thought how much we adults could learn from those we claim to teach.

I saw Nina looking at me with naked love and trust in her eyes, and suddenly it made me uneasy. It is a responsibility to be loved by someone young, especially someone with no one else to love. I hoped her disillusionment, when she got to know me better, wouldn't be too bitter for her.

'I have some pleasant news for the Dramatic Society members,' I said. 'We're doing *Hamlet* again next term at the Waverley Hospital.'

Nina looked radiant, and three other girls who were involved gave an 'Ooh!' of excitement. One said:

'Miss Eliot, may my parents come again? They like seeing me act—strange as it may seem.'

'It might be arranged. I'll ask Miss Gorrington. Remind me nearer the time, will you?'

At the mention of parents Nina looked tense and withdrawn. There would be no parents to watch her next performance. One or two of the girls glanced at her. There was an awkward silence. Luckily at that moment the bell rang for mid-morning break.

In the staff room members of staff were displaying gifts from their classes. Miss Worrell's fifth form had given her a box of fifty cigarettes and the new Agatha Christie.

'What a truly intelligent form I have,' she remarked. 'Oh dear, I wish I'd been kinder to them on their reports now.'

Miss Gent was laughing over a new pair of crimson ankle socks, presented to her by her third form. Miss Lester was looking devastated by a very pink pearl necklace.

'What shall you wear it with, Lester?' asked Miss Petal cruelly.

'Courage,' replied Miss Lester. 'What did your gang give you?'

'A book token,' said Miss Petal.

'Pity you can't read, isn't it? Like to swop with my pearls?'

'No, thanks. I shall enjoy seeing you suffer.'

'What I like about this staff room,' said Miss Worrell, 'is the nice, friendly Christmas spirit. What's your interesting-looking parcel, Eliot?'

'A clock,' I told them, 'some cigarettes and fourpence.' The story of the fourpence made them laugh.

'Isn't that darling?' said Miss Petal. 'I wonder they didn't get you a couple of packets of chewing gum with it. By the way, anyone besides me having trouble with parking chewing gum in class?'

'Put it behind your ear, Petal dear,' said Miss Lester. 'It's safe there.'

'I mean the children's parking it, clot!' said Miss Petal.

'Children in my classes don't chew gum,' retorted Miss Lester. 'If I catch them I make them go and spit it out.'

'I'll bet they don't. I've seen gum parked along the basins in the washrooms. I often wonder if they get their own pieces back,' said Miss Petal.

'Don't be disgusting,' said Miss Lester.

'Well, mine have started parking gum in their desks and under the window ledges,' continued Miss Petal. 'I had a blitz this morning and degummed the whole room. Then I felt a beast because they gave me a present. Isn't life difficult? How wonderful it will be to get away. I'm spending Christmas on a farm with three young men.'

'Congratulations,' said Miss Worrell. 'Don't come back a trigamist, that's all.'

'Even worse to come back with triplets,' said Miss Petal gaily, 'though I admit that would be quick work. Anyone else going away for Christmas?'

Miss Gent was going to her parents' home up North. She called it 'going home', although she had her own little flat near the school. I could imagine her sharing Christmas dinner with

aged parents and feeling young and carefree again. Miss Lester was staying on her own.

'I've imported all my favourite foods and books,' she said, 'and I shall just relax.'

'Wearing your pink pearls,' teased Miss Petal.

'I shall thrust those pearls down someone's throat in a minute,' Miss Lester threatened.

'Shall you have Nina with you, Eliot?' asked Miss Worrell.

'Yes, I shall. I'm going to try to give her a really happy Christmas to make up for all she's been through.'

'That won't be like a holiday from school at all,' commented Miss Petal. 'I used to like children before I started teaching, but now . . .'

'I quite envy you, Miss Eliot,' said Miss Lester unexpectedly. 'Christmas is an empty, facetious time without children.'

'Nina's lucky,' said Miss Worrell, smiling at me.

'Is she?' I answered seriously, and they were quiet for a moment, remembering.

'I wonder what will happen to her father?' said Miss Worrell. 'It's manslaughter now, isn't it? He's sure to get a jail sentence.'

'He ought to get the "cat" as well,' said Miss Gent. 'My blood still boils when I think of that man and that poor little girl.'

'Well, she's more cheerful today,' I said. 'She's had loads of cards and presents from the other girls, and we're doing *Hamlet* again next term, so she'll have Ophelia to look forward to.'

'That's what she needs,' said Miss Lester. 'Something to look forward to, all the time, and someone she can love and trust. You've quite a job on, Miss Eliot.'

'I know. I don't take it lightly.'

'Good thing you don't,' said Miss Worrell. 'It's a dangerous situation.'

'Dangerous?'

'That child's had too much fear and emotion crammed into her life. She's down in the dumps one day and on top of the world the next. If she had a steady, normal background, that wouldn't matter, but I always feel it wouldn't take much to send

her right off the rails. That's what I mean by a dangerous situation. Not that I don't think you can handle it, my dear,' she said to me.

'I hope I can. I only hope I can.'

And suddenly I had the most frightening premonition of disaster. I was afraid, without knowing why. I crossed to the window, not wanting to talk to them any more.

Outside, snow had begun to fall. The sky was heavily grey. White flakes, feather-frail, fell wantonly, waywardly, drifting and clustering on the sill, powdering the trees, thinly coating the lawn and path. Soon the grey world would be glistening white, ugliness covered for a time by gossamer snow. The beauty was illusion, of course. Underneath, the pavements were still hard and grimy, the houses gaunt and grey, the trees lean and leafless. But then wasn't all beauty and happiness an illusion? A thing of the moment, to be treasured all the more because it would not endure.

'We're going to have a white Christmas, Nina,' I murmured to myself. 'A beautiful Christmas. A happy Christmas.'

16

'HAPPY Christmas, Miss Eliot! Happy Christmas!'

Those were the first words that greeted me when I woke on Christmas morning. Nina was standing in the doorway, looking small and very young in her red dressing-gown, and bearing a tray in her hands.

'I've brought your breakfast in bed,' she said.

'Nina, how very nice of you! This is real luxury. It hasn't happened to me for years and years, not since I was a little girl at home.'

'Why don't you always wear your hair down?' she said. 'You look lovely like that, and without your glasses.'

My hair, fair and heavy, was falling over my shoulders. I groped on the bed-table for my spectacles.

'No, don't put them on,' she said. 'You should always look like that.'

'Can you imagine me taking lessons on Wordsworth with my "golden hair flowing down my back"?' I asked.

'I think it would be very suitable,' she said, 'especially for the Lucy poems. Why *do* teachers always make themselves as plain as they can?'

'We don't, darling. It's just that the iron's got into our souls and in time it begins to show.'

'That's just nonsense. I'm afraid I burnt the toast a bit and I didn't like to make fresh because of the bread situation. We've got to make our loaves last until after Boxing Day.'

'I love burnt toast,' I lied.

'I hope the egg isn't overboiled.'

'It's perfect.'

'I gave it four minutes. That was how Mother always liked hers—hard.'

'Did you give her breakfast in bed on Christmas Day?'

'Sometimes. It depended.' She averted her eyes.

'What about your own breakfast, Nina?'

'I'll have it downstairs.'

'No, bring it up and talk to me.'

'All right. May I bring my stocking? I haven't opened it yet. It was the most wonderful surprise. I've not had a stocking filled since I was young. That wonderful crinkly feeling it has. I felt it in the dark this morning. When did you put it in my room? I didn't hear you.'

'I had the chimney specially oiled so I could climb down quietly.'

Her laughter trilled back to me as she sped down to fetch her stocking and her breakfast.

Never have I seen a child demolish a breakfast so fast, then she concentrated on the stocking. There was nothing expensive in it, the usual sweets, nuts, fruit and trinkets. Only the toe was

special. I'd bought her one of those little glass animals that some people make a fetish of collecting. It was a tiny gambolling lamb, spindly-legged, delicate, extraordinarily touching.

'Oh, it's lovely! It's a darling little thing! I've never seen anything so lambie! Oh, thank you! And thank you for my stocking. And for everything.'

She hurled herself at me, causing my breakfast tray to lurch perilously, and kissed me.

'I don't know what I'd do without you,' she said. 'I'd die. I love you, I love you! Oh, it's going to be such a wonderful Christmas Day! Everything's white outside. Shall we play snowballs after breakfast?'

Inwardly I groaned, but I nibbled my burnt toast bravely and said: 'If you like, Nina.'

'Not if you don't want to. I just thought it would be fun.'

'It will be. Great fun. Now, if you'll clear the decks I'll get up.'

Laughing, she removed from my bed the litter of wrappings from her stocking and the breakfast tray.

'I'll wash the dishes first,' she said.

I heard her singing as she dashed about the house, some of those sad little songs that Ophelia sings. But her voice was light and gay. She was happy. And I was happy.

We put on warm clothes and went for a walk in the park. We made patterns on the grass with our footprints, drew pictures in the snow with sticks, and shied snowballs at each other. We ran and laughed, and it was difficult to decide which of us was the more childish of the two. Probably myself.

Back at the flat we cooked our Christmas dinner together. I had bought a small chicken and Nina proved far better at handling it than I was. She even suggested 'doing things' with the giblets, which I usually dumped in the bin.

'You aren't very domesticated, are you, Miss Eliot?' she said once.

'That,' I admitted, 'is a masterly understatement.'

'Well,' she said, 'you've got me to look after you now, always and always.'

She smiled, radiantly, trustingly.

When we'd eaten our meal Nina washed the wishbone and held it out to me.

'Pull and wish,' she said.

I didn't bother to wish, and I hardly pulled at all, hoping she would get the larger piece. Nina closed her eyes and was wishing hard. The frail bone snapped. I was left with the larger piece in my hand. Nina stared sadly at the smaller piece.

Then she shrugged and said:

'I don't suppose there's anything in it. I'm not really superstitious.'

'What do you want to do this afternoon?' I asked, as we washed up afterwards.

'Rehearse Ophelia.'

'Isn't that rather like work?'

'Acting isn't work. It's heaven. Do you mind?'

'Of course not. I want you to do what *you* want to do. I'll give you your cues.'

'Will you really? How lovely!'

So while the snow started to fall again outside and the fire burned brightly, we went over the Ophelia scenes in *Hamlet*, then over other Shakespearian scenes simply for our own pleasure. Nina was Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth, Portia and Viola in quick succession.

'Viola's one of my favourite parts,' she said. 'Especially the willow cabin bit, when Olivia asks Viola what she'd do if she were in love with someone terribly, and Viola says:

'Make me a willow cabin at your gate,
And call upon my soul within the house;
Write loyal cantons of contemned love
And sing them loud even in the dead of night;
Halloo your name to the reverberate hills,
And make the babbling gossip of the air
Cry out "Olivia!" O, you should not rest
Between the elements of air and earth,
But you should pity me!'

She stood before me, eager, intense, passionate, declaiming the lovely lines, and added quietly at the end:

'My willow cabin's at your gate. You know that, don't you? But of course I'm luckier than poor Viola. You invited me in. Oh, I'm so happy! I've never been so happy. Can one be too happy? Is it wrong?'

I shook my head.

'Let's go through Ophelia once more.'

By the end of the afternoon I was exhausted. Nina seemed tireless. She was wrought up to a pitch of excitement and delight.

In the evening we listened to a play on the radio. It was eleven o'clock before she went to bed.

When I said good night to her, she said:

'I don't know how to say thank you, but you know how I feel. This has been the happiest day of my life. Nothing else matters but here, and now, and you.'

'Nina, don't make a goddess out of me! I'm an ordinary woman. You mustn't . . .'

'To me you're a goddess. I won't hear a word against you. Not even from you. Kiss me good night.'

She lay down in bed and held out her arms.

I kissed her and murmured: 'Good night, Ophelia.'

Her gay, alert little voice, that sounded as if it were far from sleep, replied: 'Good night, sweet prince—good night.'

But when I looked into her room ten minutes later she was fast asleep, one cheek on her hand, a faint smile on her lips, the little lamb standing in lonely glory on her bed-table. She was a happy child, asleep in a quiet room. Yet still I was afraid.

THE first few days after Christmas passed happily. We went for walks, took bus rides, went to the pictures. We talked of everything under the sun—except Nina's past. I think I did make her forget

during those happy days. Then on the Friday the local paper arrived and there was the headline 'Child Ignores Father at Mother's Funeral', and the photograph of Nina sweeping past her father at the church door. If there had been time, I'd have hidden the paper from Nina, but she usually rose before me and when I came down to breakfast I found her hunched in a chair, the photograph before her.

She looked up at me and said quietly: 'Sometimes I feel I can't go on. It's too much. One thing after another. They won't let you forget.'

'Don't let a stupid newspaper photograph upset you. It's nothing. Less than nothing.'

'What's done cannot be undone. In a few weeks he'll be in court, and there'll be more talk, more articles. It will always be with me. People will always look and point. As if I were branded.'

'Nina, stop talking such rubbish. It wasn't like that when you went back to school after the funeral, now was it? Remember how many presents you got?'

'Yes.' She smiled a little. 'They were sorry for me. I don't really enjoy people being sorry for me. If it weren't for you I'd be so miserable I'd want to die.'

'Stop dramatizing yourself, child. I'm not impressed.'

'You won't ever leave me, will you? You won't let them take me away? I couldn't bear it.'

'You won't have to do anything you don't want to do. I'll see to that.'

'Suppose one day you weren't here.'

'But I am here, Nina, I *am* here.'

'I'm sorry to be such a fool. It's just that sometimes I feel so happy, then the next minute so miserable. As if I were two people. Perhaps I'm crazy, the way my father was crazy. He was like that. He'd be gay and happy one day, be sweet to Mother and me, then the next day he'd be gloomy and bad-tempered. And violent. I'm the same.'

'You have some of your father's qualities, I expect, and some

of your mother's. You've inherited your mother's courage and intelligence, your father's looks and acting ability, and a touch of moodiness perhaps.'

'My moods frighten me. I don't seem able to control them.'

'Darling, you're so very young!'

'No, I'm not. Not any more.'

'Oh Nina, you'll feel young again, I promise you. You've been so brave in all this business, you know. Many girls would have collapsed completely, hidden away from things, refused to go to school, but you've stuck it out and everyone's admired you for it. Perhaps you've been too brave and now you're feeling the reaction.'

'I'm not brave, any more than Ophelia was brave.'

'Well, I say you are, my poppet, and I've known hundreds of girls.'

She said: 'As long as I have you, I'll be all right. As long as you don't go away.'

'Why should I go away, you little silly?'

'I've got a feeling.'

'Well, if that's all it is, banish it from your mind.' I pulled her hair teasingly. She grasped my hand feverishly and pressed it against her face.

'Come on,' I said gently. 'Snap out of it. I'm starving for my breakfast.'

'Oh gracious! I'm so sorry! How awful of me!'

She sprang to her feet and rushed into the kitchen. I followed her slowly, troubled in mind and heart. While I made the tea and coffee, Nina carried the dishes back into the living-room. When I followed her with the teapot I saw that the newspaper had been torn into many pieces and thrust into the waste-paper basket.

The holiday passed all too quickly: It seemed no time before the first day of term arrived and Nina and I had to get up early and rush out to catch our bus.

First day of term. Only a teacher can know the horror of it. The first impact of noise. Once a term has got going, one becomes

inured to the constant noise, the clamour of voices and the clatter of footsteps, but on the first day it batters at the eardrums and one thinks: 'I can't possibly stand this for a whole term!' Then the inexorable time-table takes over, the pattern of bells and lessons is re-formed, and by the afternoon one has forgotten one had a holiday at all.

There was great excitement in the staff room. Miss Petal returned with a dazzling diamond ring on her finger.

'At last,' she announced proudly. 'I've hooked a man. He proposed to me over the Christmas port. I shall be leaving at the end of this term. Oh, heavenly bliss!'

'Are you marrying him to get away from school or because he's your heart's delight?' asked Miss Lester, feeling miserable because it was first day of term, looking exquisite as usual.

'A bit of both,' admitted Miss Petal frankly. 'He's a sweet thing. I'll bring him round and show him to you some time. But I must admit that the thought of having him isn't any more exquisite than the thought of *not* having to teach any more.'

'You'll probably have children of your own,' Miss Worral reminded her, 'and that will be far more trying than just having other people's from nine till four.'

'But it's fine having your *own* children,' said Miss Petal. 'You send them to school and other people look after them while you have your hair done and go to the cinema.'

'Just a parking ground for kids, that's all we are,' grumbled Miss Lester. 'Child-minders! Wasting our brilliant brains on the moronic offspring of the general public. If ever I have a Petal child to teach, I shall go round the bend.'

'If it's a girl I shall call it *Avril*,' said Miss Petal dreamily.

'And if it's a boy,' said Miss Lester, 'you must call it Pythagoras, as a reminder of the good old maths-teaching days.'

'Or Logarithm,' chuckled Miss Petal. 'Log for short. Still, I mustn't go too far ahead. I'm not even married yet. Not that that would worry some girls.'

'These high spirits on first day stun me,' sighed Miss Lester. 'By the way, Eliot, how's the little Trent girl? I saw a most tasteless photograph in the local paper. Hope she didn't see it.'

'She did; it upset her a lot.'

'I shall be sorry for the poor child when the court case starts,' said Miss Gent. 'We hoped it would be over in the holidays, but there's been a delay. Everyone will be talking about it once it starts.'

'Perhaps she'll rather enjoy it,' said Miss Petal. 'I should think she's the type to dramatize herself.'

'That,' I said coldly, 'is a particularly heartless thing to say.'

'Might be true, all the same.'

'It's not true! Nina's been fine during all this!'

'All right, old thing. I won't touch your little ewe lamb,' said Miss Petal, looking surprised. 'Don't get worked up.'

Worked up! I suppose I was. I was nervous and edgy, ready to lash out at anyone who criticized Nina. How stupid and unnecessary!

Miss Worrell said kindly: 'Sit down, Eliot, and have a cigarette. You look tired. That child's taking it out of you.'

'I can't help worrying about her a little. I've a feeling that something's going to go wrong.'

'That's just nerves.'

'I hope so. Anyway, I've no time to feel tired this term. There's this *Hamlet* business to see to. We must have a few rehearsals.'

'That's good for Nina.'

'Yes, very. It's a godsend. Bless her! She does so love playing Ophelia. She's happy when she's acting.'

'It's an escape,' said Miss Worrell. 'She gets out of herself. Reality is too much for her. Poor little girl. Take care of her when that damned father of hers appears in court.'

'I'll take care of her,' I promised. Ironic promise!

The lesson bell rang. Constant. Inexorable.

'I hear the bell of doom,' said Miss Petal. 'Prisoners, back to your cells!'

Yes, we were all prisoners. Prisoners of our emotions, our fears, our destinies, ourselves. Mankind, the Great Unfair!

David Trent was found guilty of manslaughter and sentenced to ten years' imprisonment.

On the day of his trial Nina moved about the school like a little white-faced ghost. She spoke to no one. She was avoided by the other children. They were frightened by her stricken expression, her air of touch me not. Groups of girls would become silent at her approach and draw together, whispering, as she went out of earshot. The child moved in a nightmare world. Desperate with pity for her, I could do nothing.

She must have run home from school as soon as the last bell went, for she was already there when I arrived. I had an evening paper in my handbag and didn't intend letting her see it.

She had forestalled me. She was sitting at the table, the three evening papers laid out before her. She was reading the sordid details of her father's past life, the horror he had inflicted on his wife, a doctor's description of the woman's injuries, the judge's harsh words to the prisoner before he sentenced him. Nothing was glossed over. The man who had beaten his wife to death was not spared.

There was a photograph of David Trent as he walked to the van which would take him to prison. His face was skeleton thin. His cold eyes glared. His mouth was set in lines of misery. Yet still his shoulders were straight, his figure erect. There was nothing humble about the prisoner.

I stood behind Nina and put my hand on her shoulder. She made no movement, only said in a dull little voice:

'Do you want me to stay here now?'

'Of course I do! What difference does all this journalistic rubbish make to you and me?'

'It's not rubbish. It's the truth. If you don't want me to stay, if you don't want a monster's daughter in your house, you've only to say so.'

Her face, as she turned to me, reminded me of her father's, haggard, despairing, proud and old.

'Listen to me, Nina,' I said, taking her hands. 'I brought you here to live with me because you had nowhere else to go and I was sorry for you! I didn't know whether it would be a success or not. Now, I love having you here for your own sake. Not because I'm sorry for you, but because I'm fond of you. I was lonely before, and so were you. Now we have each other. Suppose something happened to me that made everyone stare at me, that brought me to the attention of the newspapers, would you want to leave me?'

'Oh no, of course I wouldn't!'

'Then why should you think I'd want to leave you because of all this—all this that isn't even remotely your fault.'

'He wants to see me,' she said. 'At the end, when they asked if he had anything to say, he said: "I'd like to see my daughter just once again." I won't see him! I won't! No one can make me! I hate him! I'm glad he's being sent to prison. I wish they'd put him there for life. I won't see him—I won't. Oh, Father, Father!' She broke down, weeping, clinging to me, her face distorted with tears.

'You won't make me see him, will you?'

'No one's going to make you do anything. But wouldn't you feel better if you saw him, just once, Nina?'

'No, I'd only want to kill him. I hate myself for not hating him more. For remembering the way he smiled sometimes. And made us laugh. It's not fair that so much evil could sometimes wear a mask of—of sweetness. No, I won't see him. Oh, hold me tight! Don't leave me. Don't go away!'

'I won't go away. Where would I go, silly one?'

'To the other side of the world, perhaps. Just to get away from me—from all this . . .'

'Nina, darling, do try to trust me.'

'I do trust you. Oh, I do, I do! As long as you're here I can bear anything. Without you I'd have nothing. I'd be lost. My heart would break.'

18

SWIFT and strange, Nina's mood changed from despair to happiness during the next week. She seemed to forget about her father in the excitement of the coming performance of *Hamlet* at the hospital.

On the day of the performance, she rose early and prepared breakfast. I heard her singing Ophelia's songs in the kitchen.

'What are you doing up so early?' I asked. 'Miss Gorringer said people performing in the play needn't get to school until ten o'clock as you'll be having a late night.'

'It's a wonderful day, the sun's shining—I had to get up. I love winter sunshine. It's so pale and clean. It's warm without scorching you. I feel so gay this morning. Would you like two eggs or one?'

'No eggs, thanks. I'm nervous as a kitten.'

'You? Why?'

'I always have butterflies in my stomach on the day of a performance.'

'But you aren't acting.'

'No, but I feel responsible.'

'I don't feel at all nervous. I'm taking this with me to bring me luck.' She held up the little glass lamb I had put in the toe of her Christmas stocking.

'Careful you don't break it,' I said.

'Break it? Never! If I broke it, it would mean I was broken too.' She was silent for a second, a shadow passing across her gaiety. 'Suddenly I felt strange,' she said. 'I'm all right now.' She smiled and went on: 'I can hardly wait to get on the stage and bring Ophelia to life again! Lovely Ophelia! She's lain quiet for so long.'

We talked of the play over breakfast. Nina, irrepressible in her light-heartedness, said:

'I'm going to go over my part again all by myself, then I'll come to school at ten.'

'Some people,' I grumbled, 'have all the luck,' and she laughed happily.

'Do your part for Mrs. Jones when she comes,' I suggested. 'She'll be thrilled at a special performance.'

Mrs. Jones was a 'daily' who gave my flat a weekly clean during term time, and this was 'her morning'.

'Oh yes,' laughed Nina, 'I'll have Mrs. Jones as an audience. What fun!'

On my way to the bus stop I met Mrs. Jones, stout little woman, scurrying along in an inimitable hat with false fruit at the brim.

'Nina's still at home,' I told her. 'She's longing to do her part in the play for you.'

'There now, won't that be nice?' beamed Mrs. Jones. 'You're doing it at the hospital tonight, aren't you?'

'Yes. Keep your fingers crossed for us.'

'I will, Miss Eliot. Very good luck to you.'

She went on her way, and I was glad that Nina would have such cheerful company before she came to school.

As I continued my journey alone, I brooded over a letter I had received from Australia two days ago. Several weeks before, when Nina Trent had merely been one girl in four hundred pupils, not the very special person she was to me now, I had felt restless at school, longed for something new and exciting, and in an impulsive moment had applied for a teaching job in Sydney. Forms had been sent to me, I'd filled them in, returned them, then almost forgotten about them. Now I had received a very friendly letter offering me the job and telling me what formalities I would have to go through before setting sail. My first feeling on opening the letter had been of pleasure and excitement. A new life. New people. New surroundings. Then I remembered Nina. I couldn't leave her now and it was unlikely I'd be allowed to take her with me. I had not yet written to turn the job down—it's always a little painful to close a door that leads to adventure—but I had made up my mind not to accept it.

At mid-morning break that day, however, I couldn't resist mentioning it.

'Remember I applied for that job in Australia?' I said to the other members of staff. 'Well, they've offered it to me.'

There was a knock at the staff room door as I spoke. Miss Gent opened it. I didn't turn to see who was there.

Miss Petal said: 'So you're going to Australia, Eliot! Well, good luck to you! It's quite a term, isn't it? Me getting engaged, and you going to the Big Wide Open Spaces.'

'Miss Eliot, you're wanted,' called Miss Gent from the door.

I went to the door, but when I got outside no one was there.

'I thought you said someone wanted me, Miss Gent,' I said, returning and closing the door again.

'Yes, Nina Trent.'

'She's not there now.'

'How odd. Oh well, it's almost time for class. Perhaps she couldn't wait.'

'What's all this about Australia?' asked Miss Warrell.

'I've decided not to go,' I said. 'I'll tell you about it later.'

The bell rang as I spoke and I didn't think of the subject again. It was only later that I realized what Nina must have overheard at that staff room door; only later still, tragically too late, that Mrs. Jones told me she'd seen the Australian letter that morning in the letter file on my desk—'Not that I read your letters, miss,' she'd added, looking guilty—and had said to Nina: 'So your Miss Eliot's going to teach in Australia, is she? That'll be a nice change for her. But you'll miss her, won't you, Nina?'

'Very queer she looked, Miss Eliot, when I said that,' Mrs. Jones told me. 'Then she quite shocked me. She was quiet for a long time, then she said: "No, Mrs. Jones, I shan't miss her. I shan't miss anyone." Of course, I never guessed . . .' Poor Mrs. Jones, how could she have guessed? How could any of us have guessed? Nina must have come to the staff room to ask me about it, perhaps, then overheard Miss Petal's words: 'So you're going to Australia, Eliot. Well, good luck to you!'

I knew nothing of all this as I taught my classes that day, as the Dramatic Society gathered in the hall after school, as we all piled into the coach to take us to the hospital. I saw Nina among the others, looking pale, and only thought: 'She's nervous now, poor darling.' When she avoided my eyes and deliberately sat as far from me as possible in the coach, I wondered a little, but was too concerned about the play to wonder long.

When we reached the hospital, I managed to draw alongside Nina and said:

'Did you want me for anything, Nina? Miss Gent said you came to see me at morning break.'

'It was nothing,' she said. 'I was going to ask you something, but it doesn't matter now.'

'Something about Ophelia?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Ophelia.'

'Nina, do you feel all right?'

She looked so white, her eyes staring strangely.

'Yes, I'm all right.'

'Good luck, then, Ophelia,' I said, my hand on her shoulder. She turned her head quickly and kissed my hand. 'Nina . . .' But she had moved away from me. I thrust the shadow of uneasiness out of my mind. There was so much work to do, the make-up to see to and the costumes, the complications of an unfamiliar stage.

After a hectic hour of preparation, the curtain went up and the play began.

I joined the audience of mingled 'sitting' patients and nursing staff. The children were at their best tonight. The very appreciative audience seemed to encourage them to excel themselves. *Hamlet* came to life even more vividly than it had at the school performance. Marian was excellent—graceful in gesture, passionately sincere in utterance. And Nina—my Nina—was brilliant.

Any flaws that had existed in her former performance had vanished now. She *was* Ophelia. She moved me almost to tears,

and I noticed the rapt expressions of the members of the audience when she was on the stage. During her final scene, when she sang her strange little songs in that light, pathetic voice, I saw tears on the faces of those around me. Then she did something a little different, and most effective, at the end of the scene.

As she sang her last song and spoke her last sentence, 'God be wi' you!', instead of drifting off the stage as she had during rehearsals, she stayed there for a moment, her little face tragically beautiful, the green dress flowing about her thin figure, looked intently at the audience, and said again, softly:

'God be wi' you!' She looked straight at me and smiled. A wonderful, radiant smile. Unforgettable. A smile stamped on the eyes for ever and ever. It is with me now. It will always be with me.

Applause broke out when she made her exit and much as I normally dislike the interruption of a scene by indiscriminate applause, I found myself clapping with the rest. Nina had stolen the show.

The play continued. I paid scant attention for a while, still enchanted, dreaming a little of Nina's future—Dramatic School perhaps—a career on the stage. Then my attention was caught again. The Queen's lines came over more loudly than usual, seemed to echo round the hall with a reverberation of horror and doom:

'One woe doth tread upon another's heel,
So fast they follow: your sister's drown'd, Laertes.'
'Drown'd! O, where?'
'There is a willow grows aslant a brook,
'That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream;
There with fantastic garlands did she come
Of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them
There, on the pendent boughs her coronet weeds
Clambering to hand, an envious silver broke;

When down her weedy trophies and herself
 Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,
 And mead-~~me~~maid-like a while they bore her up
 Which times she chanted snatches of old tunes,
 As one incapable of her own distress,
 Or like a creature native and indued
 Unto that element; but long it could not be
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,
 Pull'd the poor wretch from her melodious lay
 To muddy death.'

The voice faded. I became icy cold. I felt a choking sensation in my throat and couldn't get my breath. I seemed to be struggling in airless darkness. A great weight pressed on me. As if I were drowning. I struggled to my feet. One of the nurses in the audience saw my plight, took my arm and half supported me out of the hall. There I fainted.

'When I regained consciousness, I whispered: 'Where's Nina? Find her.'

" 'Nina? Which is she, dear?'

' 'Ophelia. You must find her.'

But we couldn't find her. No one had seen her since she made her final exit. We searched the wards and the corridors.

Then we searched the grounds.

The moon was shining. We walked across the lawn, a fantastic parade of people, the girls in their extravagantly colourful costumes, the paint on their faces standing out starkly in the moonlight, the nurses in their sober uniforms.

There was a lake in the grounds with willows growing at the brink, their leaves dipping low, silver in the pale moonlight.

Then Marian, ashen-faced, slender in her black velvet costume, pointed towards the shore and said:

'Look!'

We caught a glimpse of green in the water that lapped against the shore, saw a glimmer of white skin. We saw—Ophelia. And I began to run towards the lake. It was the dream turned reality. The dream. And this time there was no waking.

When we brought her out of the water, we found one hand tightly clenched. The small, cold, stiff fingers were opened. A tiny object was revealed.

It was the little glass lamb.

It was broken.

BOOK THREE

CHILDREN AFRAID

1

HEAVY mist hung over the school and surrounding playing-fields. It was only three in the afternoon yet lights already burned from windows, gold against the grey. Through the ground-floor window next to the main door I saw, like a stage set, the compact brightness of a classroom—about thirty little girls in their desks and a remarkably good-looking teacher poised before the blackboard.

She had black hair, drawn smoothly back from her high brow and caught in a chignon in the nape of her neck, an almost perfect profile and large, dark eyes. Her lips moved and occasionally she gesticulated with her hands. The children watched her, spellbound.

I wondered what she was telling them to hold their attention so. I wondered, also why, even at first glance and through fog and glass, she gave me a shiver of apprehension for all her beauty and vivacity. Perhaps it was the twist of cruelty to her well-shaped mouth, or the over-powerfulness of her long-fingered hands. She was the sort of person one would love or loathe, and always fear a little.

My thoughts were centred so much on my vivid first impression of this woman who would soon be my colleague that I was startled to find that I was no longer alone.

A child of about thirteen stood beside me, also staring in.

She had red hair which glowed palely in the fog and a little pointed face as grey-white as the fog itself. She wore the conventional brown tunic and white blouse that was the school uniform.

'What was she doing out here when lessons were in progress? Perhaps she had been sent out of the room for bad behaviour. One couldn't imagine it from the look of her, but I knew from experience that the most angelic-looking child can be a little demon in class.

'I think you ought to be inside,' I said. 'You'll catch cold out here in that thin blouse.'

Her expression didn't change. She just kept staring into the classroom window with wide, strange, grey eyes. I glanced back to see if anything special were holding her attention, but the lesson was progressing quite normally—if you can call it normal when all the children are paying attention. When I turned back to the child she had slipped quietly away.

At that moment a bell rang, evidently for change of lessons. That brought me to my senses. I stopped my 'peeping Tom' act and walked briskly through the main door.

It was dim just inside and I had no idea where to go. If I'd had any sense I'd have asked my little red-head where the head mistress's room was. Too late now.

Girls in single file came clattering down the stairs facing me. I seized one by the arm and said:

'Could you show me to Miss Bowling's room, please?'

'Yes, it's just here,' said the girl, pointing to a door on my right. 'Knock first,' she added kindly, then scampered off to catch up with the others.

'Come in,' said a sharp voice in reply to my knock.

I went in rather nervously and found myself in a shabbily furnished room, complete with desk, chairs and numerous untidy bookcases. Miss Bowling was sitting at the desk, a pile of papers before her.

She looked up with an irritable expression, a nervous frown with which I was to become familiar. She was a plain woman, redeemed by a mass of curling brown hair, the sort of hair that looks good without any attention being paid to it at all. And I'm sure Miss Bowling seldom paid attention to her appearance. She wore no make-up, made no effort to hide the haggard tiredness

of her thin face, the shadows under her eyes. She was wearing a white blouse and an ancient, dun-coloured cardigan.

'Good afternoon, Miss Bowling,' I said. 'I'm Jean Grey.'

'Oh, Miss Grey!' She rose instantly. She was very short and slender and moved round her desk like quicksilver, her hand outstretched.

'I can't tell you how glad I am to see you!' she said. 'We're terribly short-staffed and I'm at my wit's end. Do sit down.'

I did so gladly, for I had spent some time wandering round in the fog-bound neighbourhood trying to find the school.

'Cigarette?' She passed me a battered packet, then, as I hesitated, laughed and said: 'Do have one. I smoke like a chimney myself so you needn't be afraid of making a bad impression.'

Her frankness warmed me to her. I took the cigarette gratefully, noticing her piled ash-tray as I did so. She sat down again, puffing at her cigarette, and became business-like.

'Now, Miss Grey, when can you start?'

'Tomorrow, if you like, Miss Bowling.'

'Fine! English and history mainly. I'll take you to our senior English mistress, Miss Carruthers. She'll give you your timetable. You'll be working under her and refer your problems, if any, to her. You look very young. How long have you been teaching?'

'A year. But I've been to a number of different schools during that time.'

'Yes, I expect you have. How do you like being a permanent "temporary" teacher, as it were? Just filling in vacancies for a few weeks, then moving on to another job.'

'It gives you an insight into different types of schools, which was what I wanted, but it doesn't give you time to get to know your classes properly. As soon as you begin to get ambitious about them, or fond of them, you're whipped off somewhere else.'

'I can quite understand that. Now, is there anything special you wanted to ask me before I take you to Miss Carruthers?'

I wanted to say 'Yes, why have so many staff suddenly left your school lately?' but my courage failed me and I just said: 'I don't

think so, Miss Bowling. All my questions will be in connection with the work, and I'll have to ask Miss Carruthers about that.'

'I'll take you to her now.'

She crossed to an enormous time-table propped untidily against a bookcase, found the right place in a most masterly way, and said:

'Luckily she has a free period now, so she'll be in the staff room. Come along.'

We went up the ill-lit stairs, along a corridor to a door labelled 'Staff Room'. Miss Bowling knocked and walked in, with me in tow.

'Miss Carruthers, Miss Grey has arrived. She's ready to start tomorrow. I'm sure you'll be glad to hear that. Miss Carruthers has been valiantly taking far more English classes than she ought to fill in the gaps,' she said, turning to me.

The woman marking papers at the large table rose to her feet as the head mistress entered. She was the one I had seen through the window when I arrived. In her actual presence, the impression of her personality was even stronger. I crushed that ridiculous feeling of fear that she gave me and shook hands with her. Her hand was very hot.

When the Head had gone, we sat at the table and began to go over time-tables and syllabuses.

'You'll be taking English, all sections, with IIIA,' she said. 'They're about thirteen years old. You have four lessons a week: grammar and composition; drama—they're going to do *Macbeth*; poetry—Palgrave's *Golden*; and reading. There are set reading books in the stock-room, but I usually choose a reader myself from other sources.'

'What sort of thing?'

'I'm doing Poe's stories with them at the moment.'

'Not all of them!'

'Yes, gradually.'

'But isn't that rather strong meat for thirteen-year-olds?'

'I don't believe in shielding children from life.'

'Would you call Poe life? I'd have said much of it was the

work of a brilliant, but slightly crazed, brain, seeing life through a haze of horror.'

'I've just said that there are official school readers for those staff who lack the initiative to choose their own, Miss Grey,' she said wearily.

Her contemptuous glance made my heart beat fast. I felt my knees trembling slightly.

'You certainly keep your classes interested, Miss Carruthers,' I said, hoping to win back her favour. 'I saw you' through the window as I came up the drive. The children looked spellbound. What were you teaching them?'

'Social history. I've been taking some history classes due to shortage of staff. I didn't know I had an audience outside the window.'

'Not only me,' I laughed. 'Some little monkey who'd evidently been sent out of her own class was watching you too. A little red-haired girl, gazing at you with all her soul in her eyes.'

She turned towards me, her dark eyes enormous, her face suddenly ash-pale.

Then she rose abruptly. 'I have a class now,' she said. 'Perhaps you'd like to prepare your lessons for tomorrow.'

She left the room.

The bell rang for the last lesson of the day.

The door was flung open and an odd little creature with short grey hair and red ankle socks hurried in. She was followed by two small girls with piles of books.

'Thank you, Elsie. Thank you, Doreen. Put them on the table. Run along now.'

She gave me a toothy, friendly smile and said:

'Shall we introduce ourselves? I gather you've come to join our ever-diminishing staff. I'm Miss Denby. Geography and Scripture.'

'I'm Jean Grey. English and history.'

'Nice to meet someone who isn't scared by these silly stories. Poor Miss Bowling's been moving heaven and earth to get more staff.'

'I haven't heard any "silly stories",' Miss Denby. What *has* been happening?'

'Nothing, my dear. Absolutely nothing. That's what's so ridiculous about it all. Of course, they've no religion, these people. No faith. Without faith, the world is full of terrors. The Devil has his chance.'

'Please tell me why the staff have been leaving. Surely I have a right to know.'

'You'll know soon enough,' she said brusquely. 'Now, my dear, do you belong to the N.U.T.?' I didn't, so she treated me to twenty minutes of National Union of Teachers propaganda, and, because I am a person who is only too easily influenced, I ended up by promising to join.

Beaming with triumph, she said: 'Now I'm going home. Miss Bowling lets us go home early when we have the last period free. Oh, look at this terrible fog! It gives me the shivers! I hate it!'

She bustled out and shortly afterwards the bell rang for end of school and the rest of the staff assembled. I introduced myself to them, but by that time I was so flurried and uneasy, without quite knowing why, that they were only a succession of faces. But I did notice that there was an atmosphere of strain about them. An edginess. A tendency to laugh too easily and too loudly. They made a great fuss about the fog. Yet fogs are common enough in the London winter.

What was the matter with them all?

Why were they afraid?

And why was I afraid?

'Is there anything special you wanted to ask me?' Miss Bowling had said. All sorts of things I wanted to ask her now—but all too vague. My mind was full of questions and I couldn't define one of them.

I only knew I was glad to get away from the school and out into the fog.

I passed a number of children on my way to the station. Most of them were chattering vigorously, giggling, punching each other occasionally. Then as I neared the station I saw two little

figures in school uniform ahead of me. One was plump and made even plumper by the thick overcoat she wore and black felt hat pulled down almost over her ears—obviously Mother bought her clothes a size too large hoping her child would grow into them.

The little girl beside her had no coat, just her tunic and blouse, and no hat. I saw the glow of red hair. It was the child who had stood beside me at the classroom window earlier in the afternoon. She really ought to be wearing a coat. It was ridiculous to go about like that in this weather.

I lost sight of them for a moment as they turned the corner and mingled with the crowd among the shops near the station. In the station booking-hall I queued for my ticket, and as I descended the steps to the platform saw the little plump schoolgirl ahead of me. She seemed weighed down by her attaché case, evidently full of homework books, and as she reached the bottom of the steps her case sprang open, scattering the books about her. I helped her to pick them up. She thanked me solemnly and looked embarrassed. I remembered the agony of self-consciousness one felt at thirteen when something like this happened.

'I'm glad we've made each other's acquaintance,' I said, to put her at ease. 'I'm coming to teach at your school. My name's Miss Grey. What's yours?'

'Jennifer Logan.'

'What form are you in, Jennifer?'

'IIIA.'

'Really? I shall be taking you for English, then. Is your friend in IIIA too?—the little girl with red hair who's mad enough to go about without a coat in this weather.'

'I don't know who you mean, Miss Grey.'

The stodgy little face was impassive.

'The girl you walked to the station with.'

'I walked to the station alone.'

'But, Jennifer, I saw you. I was behind you.'

She looked straight at me, her face curiously unchildlike. Her small, hazel eyes were hostile.

'I walked to the station alone,' she said.

'Jenny, it's very wrong to lie.'

She looked away without replying. A train came snorting slowly into the fog-bound station.

'This is my train,' she said with relief. 'Goodbye, Miss Grey.'

'Goodbye, Jenny,' I said quietly. 'And, Jenny . . .'

She turned back for a second and I saw how pale she was, suddenly tight-drawn, the bones on her face prominent as they would be one day when she lost her 'puppy fat' and became a woman.

'Yes, Miss Grey?'

'If ever you want to tell me—anything, don't be afraid to come to me.'

Her mouth quivered slightly at the corners.

She said: 'Thank you, Miss Grey,' and dived into the nearest compartment. I saw her face against the window as the train steamed out. Her eyes were closed. She looked exhausted. And quite old.

I heard my own train coming in on the opposite platform and turned away.

Once in the train, grey mist pressing against the windows, trapping me blindly in the chilly carriage, I felt the touch of fear, and dreaded going back to my lonely flat.

That night the little girl with red hair came into my dreams. She kept pleading with me to do something. When I woke I couldn't remember what it was. When I saw the sunshine outside I forgot the dream altogether.

THE staff room seemed a friendly place that morning. Miss Denby came nattering to me about N.U.T. meetings. Miss Carruthers was attractive, gay and not a bit sinister, and proved helpful about my English lessons for the day. How charming she could be when she wished! I fell a little under her spell. The

games mistress, Mrs. Cromer, was a pleasant, amusing, plump girl in over-short shorts and without a patch of make-up on her rosy face. She told me I'd have to take one netball lesson a week and tried to teach me the rules. I had played at school but I didn't remember bothering about rules much.

Miss Bowling took morning assembly. I looked at the massed children carefully, trying to find my little red-head. There were several red-haired children, but none of them, I felt sure, was the one I had seen the day before.

When I went along to introduce myself to Form IIIA, bearing my copy of *Macbeth*, I honestly felt that all my nervousness of yesterday had been so much nonsense.

As I saw Jennifer Logan, sitting fatly and not very intelligently in the front of the class, I was even more certain that such a child couldn't possibly be harbouring an apparition!

The children rose as I entered. They looked at me with that sharp interest with which, having taken so many new classes in my year's teaching, I had become familiar.

'Sit down,' I said pleasantly. 'My name's Miss Grey. I shall be taking you for English from now on.'

'Won't Miss Carruthers be taking us any more?' asked a sharp-faced little dark girl.

'No, Miss Carruthers won't be taking you for English. You'll still have her for history.'

I looked for some reaction among the children, but found none. They looked neither pleased nor sorry. Only blank. Unnaturally blank, I thought. Jennifer Logan was looking positively half-witted. As she was the only one whose name I knew, and as I wanted to wake her up a bit, I said:

'Jennifer, will you go to the staff room and pick up the pile of *Macbeths* I've left on the table. Bring them straight here.'

'Yes, Miss Grey.'

She thudded out and the door banged behind her.

'What's "Macbeth"?' asked the dark child.

'A play by Shakespeare. Have you done any Shakespeare before?'

'*Midsummer Night's Dream*,' they chorused.

'Did you like it?'

'Yes'—'No'—'*It was soppy*'—'It was lovely'—'Ooh, it wasn't!'—'I couldn't *understand* it.'

'That'll do,' I said. 'I didn't ask for a shouting match.'

'Isn't there a ghost in *Macbeth*, Miss Grey?' called a fair, confident-voiced girl from the back.

'Yes, there is. A ghost comes to the King's banquet—the ghost of the man he had killed.'

'I thought there was.' She gave a quick look round the class, which had become suddenly silent.

I noticed how chilly the room was and wondered if the heating had gone wrong. In many schools the heating apparatus spends half its time going wrong, as education committees are too mean to pay for a responsible man to look after the boilers. I was about to mention the coldness of the room, when Jennifer pounded in with a precarious pile of books. These she immediately dropped at my feet.

When that confusion had been dealt with and all the children had a copy of the play, I allotted parts to them at random and made them come out to the front to act. I walked to the back myself so I could watch.

Perhaps I hadn't chosen my Three Witches very well. They had little whispery voices and their idea of going 'round the cauldron' was a sort of swaying motion over an overturned waste-paper basket. Things bucked up when the fair girl from the back came on as Macbeth and acted the part with gusto. The scene warmed up. As they got into the swing of it, I let my attention wander. I looked out of the window at the sunshine, then down at the desk by which I was standing.

It was a fairly new desk. Clearly carved on it with a penknife was the name 'Tamara'. The cut had obviously been done very recently. A penknife lay on the desk. It was the desk of the girl playing Macbeth.

When the scene ended I said clearly:

'Tamara, come here.'

The children turned to me with wide, astonished eyes. They couldn't have looked more horrified if I'd uttered some frightful oath.

The girls who had been acting stood petrified. There was utter silence. Surely I hadn't sounded so very fierce.

I looked directly at the girl I wanted and said: 'Your name is Tamara, isn't it?'

'No, Miss Grey. I'm Doris Atkins, the form captain.'

'Form captain indeed? Then come here and explain the damage you've done to your desk.'

She came slowly, her face pale, all the confidence gone out of her.

'Did you do that, Doris?'

'I don't know—no, I didn't—yes . . .'

'Make up your mind, Doris!'

'I didn't mean to do it,' she burst out. 'I was just sitting with the penknife in my hand, thinking about her, then I realized what I'd done. I didn't mean to do it, honestly! If I'd meant to do it, I'd have done my own name, wouldn't I? It's my desk. I was thinking about her and . . .'

'Thinking about whom?'

'About Tamara.'

'Who is this mysterious Tamara?'

Again the silence. I turned to the little dark girl who had questioned me about *Macbeth* at the beginning of the lesson.

'What's your name?' I asked.

'Alice Hughes.'

'Well, Alice, will you answer the question which seems to have struck Doris dumb?'

'Tamara's not here any more, Miss Grey. She had an accident last term. She's dead.'

Dead. The word had no place in a roomful of children. They were sitting too still, too tensely. Suddenly there was a strange little whimpering noise from the front of the class. Jennifer Logan was weeping, red hands pressing hopelessly over wet eyes and cheeks.

'Jenny was Tamara's best friend,' said Alice.

'This had gone on long enough. 'Go back to your places now,' I said briskly to the girls in front. 'Alice, take Jenny along to the washroom until she feels better. And Doris, no more carving on desks. If you start carving a name every time you think of someone, I shall soon be finding "Dickie Valentine" scrawled all over the desks.'

They smiled with relief. The sound of Jenny's sobbing receded as she went down the corridor. The lesson was resumed.

Jenny and Alice came back before the end of the period. I paid no attention to them. But I knew that Jenny didn't take in a word of what I was saying, and when I told them that for homework they were to write in their own words a description of the first two scenes of *Macbeth* she gave me a very woebegone look. Somehow I felt that Jenny was not going to be 'good at English'. Poor little pudding! It must be a great shock when you're only thirteen and your best friend is killed.

.

Lunch was served in the staff dining-room. Most of the staff, except those unfortunates who were on 'dinner duty', were there. I sat next to Mrs. Cramer, the games mistress. As we ploughed through our steak-and-kidney pudding, followed by ginger pudding and treacle (woe to our figures!), I told her about the scene in class and asked:

'What happened to the child called Tamara? One of the girls said she had an accident.'

'Tamara Jones. Yes, she was knocked over by a bus just outside the school.'

'How dreadful! I suppose it happened at the end of the afternoon, just as darkness was falling, when they all rush out like mad things.'

'It was in the middle of the afternoon. It was foggy.'

'But what was she doing out of school at that time?'

'She ran out of a classroom into the street.'

'Out of *the* classroom! But why?'

'That's what many of us would like to know,' she said grimly.

'That's what I think Miss Bowling should have taken more trouble to find out. Admittedly she was a neurotic kid—no earthly good at games—but even a nervous child doesn't rush out of class into the road without a damned good reason.'

'Whose class was she in?'

'Miss Carruthers'. She dropped her voice, as Miss Carruthers herself was sitting not far from us, her lovely profile bent over her ginger pudding, which she was regarding with some distaste.

'Looks seedy, doesn't she?' murmured Mrs. Cromer. 'As if she's got something on her mind.'

It was true that Miss Carruthers looked pale and strained.

'Didn't she tell you what happened in class that time?' I asked.

'She said she'd ticked Tamara off about some work she hadn't done properly, and the kid just got up and rushed out. She thought it was "showing off"—that's how she put it—and had no idea Tamara would go out of the school altogether. Next thing she heard was a scream outside, the grind of brakes. Even then she didn't connect it with Tamara. It was so foggy. She concluded there'd been an accident outside and said she tried to keep the children working in spite of the distraction. The "distraction" turned out to be Tamara's death.'

'But Tamara surely wouldn't rush out just for a scolding!'

'I wouldn't have thought so. Mind you, she had an awful crush on Carruthers. Some of them do, you know. She's the sort of woman people adore or loathe.'

'And you?'

'I dislike her. She oughtn't to be in charge of children at all.'

'She has heaps of personality. She *could* be a wonderful teacher.'

'It's the sort that *could* be wonderful who also *can* be perfect devils. I wouldn't trust Carruthers a yard with any child of mine. She's sadistic.'

'Oh, come now! It's not as bad as all that.'

'Perhaps it isn't. Doesn't spoil my appetite, anyway,' she said, scraping her plate vigorously.

'Mrs. Cromer——'

'Oh, call me Nell, for goodness' sake. And I'll call you Jean. Then we can feel less like schoolma'ams.'

'Nell, did Tamara Jones's death have anything to do with the number of staff who left last term, and the difficulty of getting replacements?'

'Something.' Nell's expression became guarded. A familiar look on the faces of teachers at this school. On the children's faces too. Alice Hughes's face. Doris Atkins's face. Jenny's face when I spoke to her the night before.

'I feel there's a mystery,' I said.

'It's only a lot of tripe,' said Nell. 'Rumours went round that Tamara's ghost haunted the school. Did you ever hear such rubbish? The fact is that we were all in such a dither after it happened, with parents ringing up, police calling, reporters trying to get in, and so on, that we were ready to imagine anything. Two of the staff and one of the children claimed to have seen Tamara wandering round the grounds several days after she died. We were having a series of foggy days then, and you know how people can imagine queer shapes in the fog.'

'Which of the staff was it, Nell?'

'The lonely ones,' she said thoughtfully. 'Perhaps ghosts do appear to the lonely ones. Anyway, they left, with two others.'

'And the child?'

'Jennifer Logan, IIIA.'

'Tamara's friend.'

'Yes. Poor kid was in a state of shock, ready to see anything. She got a thorough ticking-off from Miss Bowling for being such a little goose.'

'And has anyone seen the—the ghost since?'

'Of course not. We got over the shock, the holidays came, so we all got away from the place. Now we're in the middle of a new term and everything's back to normal. Don't tell me you believe in ghosts!'

I avoided her question by asking another. 'What was Tamara Jones like?'

'Most of the staff say she was clever. Particularly good at

English, hence her crush on Carruthers, I suppose. She could write very well. Her netball was hopeless and her hockey worse, not that I hold that against her. Dreadful to be like that, in the fog, nobody knowing or caring. Oh dear, aren't we getting morbid? Let's get out of here. If we talk about Tamara any more, I shall cry—poor little scrap!

As we left the dining-room I said: 'Just tell me one thing more, Nell. What did Tamara look like?'

'Oh, thin, pale—just a little girl with red hair.'

3

It was past midnight. Alone in my flat, I sat at my desk by the electric fire and wearily marked the last pile of homework books. How I hated 'marking'! Teaching wouldn't be too bad if it weren't for the constant flow of exercise books, the same spelling mistake cropping up again and again until one grew uncertain oneself of how to spell the most ordinary words. I scrawled an impatient red 'S' through 'Macbeath' which kept appearing in the essay before me, and cursed IIIA and all its works.

One rather odd thing struck me as I worked through the *Macbeth* essays. All the children laid great stress on the horror of the witches. There were grim descriptions of evil eyes, wild hair, hands like tentacles, ideas not to be found in the text of the play in those early scenes. It was as if they'd read up some book on witches recently. That was unlikely. The study of witchcraft certainly didn't come into the history syllabus. Yet the children were positively witch-ridden. Macbeth and Banquo hardly got a mention.

On the last book in the pile I saw the name 'Jennifer Logan' printed neatly on the cover. Smiling slightly, fairly sure that there wouldn't be any fireworks in this book, I opened it.

Glancing through earlier exercises, I saw that the first pieces of work in the book were written neatly in clear, round,

unimaginative handwriting. Five out of ten was the average mark. Then the work showed a distinct change. The writing became eccentric. An essay would start in the familiar round hand, then change completely to a jagged, untidy style of writing, as if some untamed spirit were trying to break through Jenny's placid exterior. I flipped over the pages to the most recent essay.

'The First Three Scenes in "Macbeth"' was the heading in careful capitals, underlined in red.

' "Macbeth" is a play by William Shakespeare. It begins with three scenes. The first scene is very short. There is thunder and lightning and it is in a desert place. I didn't know there were any deserts in Scotland.' I chuckled at that one. 'Three witches are talking. They have a stew pot in the middle. They all sing together "Fair is foul and foul is fair".' At this point there was a smudge of ink and the writing changed abruptly. The essay continued:

Fair is foul and foul is fair. How true that is. The most beautiful creatures can have the depths of evil in their hearts. The most beautiful eyes can cast a wicked spell while they gaze most softly. Everything these fair-foul creatures touch with their beautiful fingers is poisoned. Their tenderness is not gentle. It is a snake-like cunning. They are like snakes. Lovely, sickening, fatal. They wrap themselves round their victim softly, like a caress, then they squeeze. And squeeze. And squeeze. And suddenly the eyes of the dying see the foulness behind the fairness. The eyes of the dying see the filth behind the beauty. But then it is too late. For the eyes of the dying are almost the eyes of the dead. Sometimes of the living dead. For to be in the power of a fair-foulness is to be dead. Many of the living are thus dead. Many of the dead cannot rest, cannot truly die.

Again the writing changed. In the painstaking round script followed:

Macbeth and Banquo come to the desert and see the witches and do not like the look of them. They have choppy fingers and say funny things. That is the third scene. After that there is the fourth scene which we have not done yet.

The wild writing took up again at this point with the words: 'Send her away. Send her away. Send her away.'

I sat staring at the queer, frightening little essay. I found I was shivering in spite of the fire, the fine hair on my arms standing on end, the hair on my scalp creeping. How could I mark the essay? Five out of ten suggested mediocrity. Yet there was nothing mediocre about this piece of work. What strange impulses and fears were working in Jenny Logan's mind? Had the shock of Tamara's death unhinged her a little?

Again I looked back at her former essays. Yes, the queer writing started to appear towards the end of the previous term, about the time when Tamara died. Perhaps the child ought to see a psychiatrist.

Giving the essay no mark, I wrote 'See me' at the end, replaced the book on the pile and pushed it nervously away from me. Somehow I couldn't sum up the energy to get ready for bed. I sat there in the pool of lamplight, thinking, wondering.

'Send her away.' What did that mean? Send whom away?

'I'm frightened,' I said aloud to the shadows in the corners of the room. I rose and switched on the centre light. The shadows retreated, vanquished. But I had a feeling that one day those shadows would overpower me, seize my mind, make me their slaves.

I tried to calm myself with one of those night-time drinks that are supposed to make you a terrific success in your chosen career in the space of a few weeks, and went to bed. Only then did I realize how utterly tired I was. I soon fell asleep.

I dreamed horribly. I was wandering in a fog, and everywhere I turned strange, beautiful hands with long fingers stretched out to grasp me, while snake-like forms tried to entwine my body.

When I woke, gasping and shuddering, sickened by some nebulous horror, even the sunshine pouring through the window could not banish my fears. Only when I had drunk my morning quota of black coffee—I couldn't eat anything—did I begin to feel normal again.

Even then I felt unnaturally cold. As if I'd never be really warm again.

'You look like a ghost,' Nell said when I entered the staff room.

'I feel rather like one. I was marking books late last night.'

'Poor thing! Thank God I take games. All I ever mark is a tennis court, and I do that in school time.'

'Nell, will you look at an essay for me?'

'Me? My English is hopeless. If *you* can't understand it . . .

'Look at it, please. It's Jenny Logan's essay. It worries me. I think she's not quite normal.'

'Jenny? She's the most normal child I've ever come across. Plays hockey like a little steam-roller. Starts running the way she's told and doesn't stop. Doesn't often get near the ball, I admit, but she's always in the right part of the field according to the rules. Heavens, what writing!' she said, as I handed her the exercise book. 'Why, it changes! Perhaps it's one of the symptoms of adolescence, like pimples. O.K., let's peruse the thing.'

She sat down and read the essay.

• 'Well, what do you think of it, Nell?'

'Peculiar. Child's been reading those horror comics we hear so much about, I should think. Got more imagination than I'd have given her credit for. It's all complete rubbish, of course. She's showing off because you're a new teacher. They get up to these little tricks sometimes. Don't think I'm blaming them for wanting to attract attention. It's all part of growing up.'

'Why do you think she's put "Send her away" at the end?'

'Goodness knows! Perhaps she lives with a wicked stepmother. Perhaps her little sister kept bothering her while she was working. How should I know?'

'I'm going to ask her about it. I must understand.'

'You won't get anything out of Jenny. She's a little oyster. That's why it was so odd and touching her and Tamara Jones being friends. Tamara was all talk and laughter and vivacity. Jenny never showed any feelings. Yet they were inseparable.'

'Jenny has strong feelings. Look at the essay.'

'Yes, and it was Jenny who started the ghost scare. She's turning into a regular little exhibitionist. You mustn't take these half-baked little creatures too seriously, Jean. It's the age for

queerness, thirteen, fourteen. Turning from a child into a woman sets up all sorts of fancies and eccentricities in some children. We all go through something like this. The best thing to do in this case is give the essay half marks and ignore it.'

'No, I must talk to her about it.'

'That's up to you, but it's a mistake. All a child like that needs is more exercise.'

'Oh Nell!' I couldn't help laughing at her. 'Do you really think you can cure all the ills of the world on the hockey pitch?'

'Most of 'em, if I had the chance,' she said with a grin. 'Now don't you go making that monkey Jenny Logan feel important. She's full enough of herself already. Do you take IIIA this morning?'

'Yes, last period before lunch.'

'Good. You'll be so hungry by that time you won't feel inclined for soul-searchings. Heavens! Look at the time! I have thirty little demons waiting for me on the field. Cheerio!'

'So long, Nell. See you at lunch.'

Form IIIA were waiting for me quietly when I arrived to take them for the last period. They were a surprisingly quiet form for children of that age. Perhaps they were cold. The room was icy.

'Anything wrong with the heating here?' I said, going across to touch the radiator. It was fairly hot.

'It's always cold in here,' said Alice Hughes.

'How odd,' I said, for windows were closed, except for one small one at the back, and the room was next door to the one I'd just come from, which was warm enough.

'It's been cold in here since last term,' said one of the children. 'Always cold.'

'Always cold,' one or two of them murmured. I felt that at the slightest provocation they'd take up a mystic chant: 'Always cold, always cold, always cold.'

'We'll try to warm up over *Macbeth*,' I said with the painful heartiness that all teachers assume at times out of self-defence. 'I've marked your essays.'

They showed a glimmer of interest. ‘

Jenny, will you give the books back?’

I handed her the pile of exercise books. Her face still and unsmiling, she did as she was told. I watched her as she opened her own book. When she saw the ‘See me’ written at the end she looked up at me quickly. Our eyes met. For a second she looked afraid.

‘You’re a lot of bloodthirsty little creatures, aren’t you?’ I said. ‘I’ve never read so many grim descriptions of witches in my life. Where did you get it all from?’

They looked down at their books and said nothing.

‘Doris, your witches were specially gruesome specimens. Have you been reading about witches lately?’

‘No, Miss Grey. We’ve been told about them. About their rites. The awful things they do.’

‘Did, not do. They’re a part of history now.’ I knew a little about witchcraft rites, having always been fascinated by the subject, but was rather horrified that anyone should tell a thirteen-year-old child about them.

‘So you passed on the information to the others, I suppose?’

‘We’ve all been told. In history lessons. Miss Carruthers told us about them. She read to us from some old books. She gave us all the details of the things they do and what happened when they were caught and everything.’

‘How interesting.’

‘It was horrible! The things she tells us sometimes—tortures—terrible things. Is all history like that, Miss Grey?’ asked Alice.

‘Some of it, Alice, but there’s a good side too. There are tales of heroism as well as of horror.’

‘It makes you afraid to be alive, the things she tells us.’

‘I have awful dreams’—‘Why don’t you take us for history, Miss Grey?’—‘You can’t forget some of the things she says’—‘You keep seeing them in your mind, over and over.’ They were all talking at once now, quietly, fearfully.

I felt suddenly icy with anger. How dared this woman stuff children’s heads with horrors at this impressionable age? To very

young children, horror hardly register. To the adolescent, overflowing with a strange world of new emotions, groping in darkness towards maturity, nothing could be more cruel and dangerous.

'Don't all look so worried,' I said gently. 'You mustn't take stories and legends so seriously. Anyway, you'll find the witches in *Macbeth* comparatively tame and friendly ones. Now, let's get on with the play. Perhaps you'd like to volunteer for parts this time. When I read out the name of a character, put your hand up if you'd like to play it.'

They volunteered readily enough and Scene IV went through smoothly enough. Then came Scene V. To my amazement, Jenny Logan put her hand up to play Lady Macbeth. As the other two girls whose hands were up had already had parts, I gave it to her.

When the scene started I regretted my choice. She read in a flat, toneless voice. She had no more acting ability than a lump of cheese. Then, towards the end of the act, she suddenly changed:

'Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse . . .'

Her voice rang out, strong, unfamiliar, each accent clear cut, quite different from the blurring of her normal voice.

'Come thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the sound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry "Hold, hold!"'

It was a fine, dramatic piece of acting, even making me shiver a little.

Macbeth was supposed to come on the stage at this point. Doris was playing the part. She was standing staring at Jenny, her eyes full of terror. She seemed petrified.

'Come on, Doris, it's your cue,' I said.

The girl stepped forward. Jenny went on reading her part in her former flat little voice. I saw how Doris's hands trembled as she held her book. They struggled through to the end of the scene, and only at the last line did Jenny resume her dramatic voice and say with intense feeling:

'Leave all the rest—to me!'

The bell rang for the lunch-time break.

Half the children in the class jumped violently at the familiar sound. How nervy they were! Grimly I decided to speak to Miss Carruthers about her 'history' lessons.

'Thank you, Jenny and Doris,' I said. 'You may all go to lunch now.'

They rose and left the room quickly and quietly. In a second they were gone. But not chattering together as most classes were. They mingled with other talking, giggling classes in the corridor, but they were silent. Doris and Jenny had returned to their desks to collect their belongings.

I said lightly: 'Jenny quite scared you with her vivid acting, didn't she, Doris?'

Doris didn't look at me. Staring down at her desk she mumbled: 'It was her voice.'

'Jenny obviously has a fine voice when she cares to use it.' I looked at Jenny, expecting her to flush with pleasure at this praise. She seemed not to have heard.

Doris said quietly and clearly as she reached the door: 'It was Tamara's voice.'

4

THE room seemed colder than ever.

Jenny and I stood there in silence.

Then I said: 'Not a very nice trick to play, imitating Tamara's voice.'

'I didn't.'

'Perhaps you didn't mean to,' I said, relenting a little. 'Perhaps you admired her voice and unconsciously tried to speak as she did.'

'Perhaps.'

'Do you miss her very much, Jenny?'

'No.'

'But you were fond of her.'

There was a long pause, then she said: 'We belonged together.'

'Jenny, you must try to forget it all. I don't mean forget Tamara completely. One should never forget a friend. But try to forget the unpleasant part of it. Remember the fun you had with her, the happy, normal things you did. And make other friends. You mustn't cut yourself off from the other girls just because you lost your best friend.'

'I don't. They avoid me.'

'Nonsense! Why should anyone avoid you?'

'I don't know.'

'I think perhaps you make no effort. Perhaps you're shy. You can't always expect other people to make the first overture. At least, that's what I've always found. Now, will you make an effort not to brood about the past any more? I think that's what you are doing.'

She turned her head away and I saw how white she was. I wasn't trying to torture the child!

'Don't think I blame you,' I said. 'I'm not scolding. I just want to understand. That essay you wrote, for instance. What made you write those extraordinary things?'

'I don't know.'

'Jenny, what's worrying you? Anything you could tell me?' I put my hand kindly on her arm and turned her towards me. She whipped away from me and retreated. Her eyes were hostile in her pale face.

'Why don't you leave me alone?' she said roughly, and rushed out of the room.

I knew then that I'd failed, that Nell had been right when she told me not to take any notice of the essay. I'd merely put Jenny

on the defensive by probing, and I was no nearer a solution to the mystery.

Nell looked at me quizzically when I joined her in the dining-room.

'How's IIIA? Did the mysterious Jenny come clean?' she said.

'I had a talk with her. It was no good.'

'I'll refrain from saying "I told you so".'

'Thank you.' I looked distastefully at the mince and greens which had appeared before me and went on: 'I don't know what Jenny's up to. She read a part in class and imitated Tamara's voice, so one of the other children said. She scared the other child.'

'Little devil! What did you do?'

'Nothing really. I asked her about it afterwards, but she didn't explain. She makes me very uneasy, Nell. I'm half sorry for her, and half afraid of her. She gave me such a hostile, unchildlike glance.'

'How long have you been teaching, Jean?'

'A year.'

'It's not very long. You'll learn to take all this sort of thing lightly. Now get on with your meal. You must be famished. I certainly am, tearing up and down the field all morning in this cold weather.'

'IIIA's classroom is always cold.'

'My dear Jean, if you spent your life in a draughty pavilion and even draughtier playing-field, as I do, you wouldn't say a *classroom* was cold. Now, for goodness' sake snap out of this morbid mood!'

'Nell, I want to find out more about Tamara Jones. Who can tell me about her? I want to know about her parents, background, everything.'

'I believe she lived with an aunt. Miss Bowling would know all about it. But I wouldn't advise you to go worrying her. She had a bad enough time over Tamara last term and she wants the whole business forgotten. It's bad for the school. The number of

children has markedly decreased this term. You can't blame the parents. They don't like the sound of a school where children rush out on to a busy main road in the middle of the afternoon and no one knows anything about it.'

'Was there anything about Tamara in the local paper when the accident happened?'

'Yes, pages.'

'I see. Thanks.'

'Now I suppose you're going to start poring over old papers. Jean, you're incorrigible! You're the sort of person who starts wild rumours and general disquiet.'

'I didn't start them, and you know it. I just don't like mysteries.'

'I think you *do* like mysteries. You're all set to make something out of nothing. You're much too receptive, too easily influenced. You take notice of a lot of hysterical adolescents and think you're being wise and understanding. Well, you're *not*.' She looked really cross and swallowed great lumps of her food with hardly a chew per mouthful.

After a minute she said: 'Sorry I snapped. You're a nice girl and I don't like to see you making a fool of yourself. If you were married you wouldn't get into this state over little things. That's what you need. A man behind you. My husband and I have all sorts of tiffs, but I wouldn't be single again. Marriage is the life!'

'As long as you marry the right person.'

'Of course.'

'Tell me about your husband.'

'He's a teacher too. He . . . ' She got going on her husband's prowess and charm and our incipient quarrel was forgotten. Was it true what she said? That I was too easily influenced by other people, too much of a straw in the wind? I was so uncertain of myself always that I felt it might be, but even so she hadn't changed my mind about Tamara. This evening I would call at the local library and see what records they had of Tamara Jones's accident.

.

'Here are the back numbers,' said the librarian. 'They're in

data, order so you should be able to find what you want. We close this section at five-thirty p.m.,' she added pointedly.

'All right. I'll remember. Thank you.'

It was four-thirty as I sat down before the large pile of local papers and began to wade through them. I soon found what I wanted. Tamara had made front-page news.

'Girl Runs From Classroom To Death' was the headline. The reporter had gone to town on the story. He conveyed a vivid picture of the foggy afternoon, the great bus bearing down, the fragile figure of a little girl with red hair rushing out from the school gates, tearing wildly across the road without looking right or left, and being struck down by the bus in spite of the driver's efforts. Of Tamara herself, the article said that she was 'highly intelligent and very talented in the arts'. She had, as far as anyone knew, no worries. She lived quietly with her aunt, Miss Violet Avery, who was devoted to her. Her parents had separated and disposed of Tamara when she was only five. Her mother was a ballet dancer who spent most of her time in Europe and America. Her father was a business man living in Mexico.

The reporter had interviewed Miss Bowling, but obviously hadn't got much out of her—'I have nothing to say to the Press. The child's death was a tragic accident.'

The newspaper dated a week later gave a report of the inquest. This included a statement by Miss Bowling that the child was, as far as she knew, happy, but that adolescents sometimes did eccentric things.—'But for the misfortune of the bus coming along at that very moment,' she said, 'Tamara would simply have reached the other side of the road, run home, and returned to school next morning rather ashamed of herself. I in no way blame any member of my staff for what happened. People sometimes do not realize the immense strain and responsibility of teaching about thirty-five girls in one classroom. It is impossible to know what is going on in each child's mind at any given time.'

Miss Violet Avery then stated that Tamara was a happy child with many interests.

There were factual accounts of the case by the bus driver and spectators. I read them closely. One of the witnesses, a woman, reported to the police station later as having seen the accident but not having stayed to watch the developments. As most people seeing an accident are curious and want to see it out to the finish she was asked why, after seeing the child knocked down, she simply walked away. She said:

'I didn't know the child had been hurt. You see, I thought she got up straight away and ran off.'

'But the child was killed immediately. She didn't move after she was struck.'

'I realize that now, but I suppose the fog plays queer tricks. I definitely thought I saw her get up and run off into the mist. She ran right past me. I saw her red hair.'

I sat staring at the paper, no longer seeing the print.

'It's five-thirty, miss,' came a voice from the door. 'We close now.'

'All right. I'm just leaving.'

'Did you find what you wanted?'

'I don't know,' I said. 'I don't know.'

As the librarian rejoined her colleague in the lending section I heard her say: 'We don't half get some queer ones here. Quite young she is, too.'

I felt utterly alone as I went home that night. I dreaded going to bed and perhaps dreaming again, and I dreaded the next day, for I had an ordeal before me. I was going to speak to Miss Carruthers about the things she'd been telling IIIA. It would probably do not the slightest good, but I'd never have an easy conscience unless I *tried* to do something.

.

First thing next morning I looked at the time-table in the staff room to see in which room Miss Carruthers was teaching last period before lunch. She was in the ground-floor classroom, the one where I'd seen her on my first visit to the school.

So at the end of the morning I dismissed my class dead on time, made my way quickly through the children milling in the

corridors and, rather breathless, arrived at Miss Carruthers's classroom just as the last child left.

It was a dark morning, as fog had gathered outside, pressing grey and clinging against the windows. The lights were on. Miss Carruthers was standing by her desk, gathering her books together. She was wearing black today and it suited her—black hair, pale face, vivid lips, the beautiful, delicate profile. Difficult to believe that anyone who looked so charming could be feeding children with horrors. It crossed my mind that the children might have made the whole thing up. Too late to start dithering now, though.

I went into the classroom and closed the door behind me.

'Hello, Miss Grey. How are you getting on? Having any bother?' She smiled. It was a wonderful smile and somehow excited me. Like a lover's smile.

'I wanted to speak to you about IIIA,' I said.

'Aren't they behaving themselves?'

'Their behaviour's all right—in a way.'

'In a way? Most young teachers have disciplinary trouble,' she said kindly. 'You'll find that you learn gradually to keep order, but it's always difficult at first. You mustn't worry. I expect one or two of them try to rag you. If you tell me who they are, I'll have a talk with them. I'm glad you came to me.'

'It's not that. They do behave well. They don't rag me,' I said coldly. 'It's just that they're—Miss Carruthers, they're frightened.'

'Frightened? Of what?'

'I don't know for certain, but I think it's partly because of the things you tell them.'

'The things I tell them?' She wrinkled her brow and looked charmingly amused. I felt foolish.

'You've been talking to them about witchcraft.'

She laughed.

'Witches are part of social history,' she said. 'I can't very well give a lesson on Judge Jeffreys, for instance, without mentioning an occasional witch.'

'You do more than mention them. You've told the children a

lot of stuff that I'm sure isn't suitable for them. They're nervous and upset. I thought you ought to know.'

'Not suitable for children,' she murmured, still with the kind, amused look in her eyes. 'How long have you been teaching?'

'A year. People keep asking me that. I don't see what that's got to do with it.'

'I have been teaching for ten years. I was dealing with children when you were still a child yourself. Perhaps in those circumstances you will admit I am a little better qualified than you to decide what is or is not suitable for children.'

'I know it must sound impertinent of me . . .'

'Not at all. I'm glad you're so interested in the children's welfare and in the things I teach them.' She gave me a speculative glance which mystified me. I found myself half hypnotized by her fine eyes. 'It's refreshing to have a keen young teacher,' she went on. 'So many of them are cynical.'

She picked up her books as if to leave.

'I can't leave it at that,' I said. 'I want your promise that you won't feed the children's minds with any more horrors.'

Her voice was icy as she replied: 'May I suggest, Miss Grey, that you mind your own business? My lessons are nothing whatever to do with you.'

'But they are. It's wicked to frighten children.'

'I suppose it's never occurred to you that the children are leading you up the garden. Thirteen-year-olds have some queer kinks. They'll say anything to draw attention to themselves. A gullible teacher is a treat to them.'

'I believe them.'

She shrugged. 'This has gone on long enough. Let me pass, please.'

I felt helpless before her. Almost I gave way. After all, I was only a new young teacher and she was nominally in charge of my work, not I of hers. Had those children been stuffing me up with lies? They were an odd class with their strange reserve, their eyes that never met one's own. There was a guilty air about them.

'I'm—I'm sorry,' I began.

She smiled again and put her hand on my arm.

'That's all right. I understand you mean well. I like you, Miss Grey. I think we should get on well together. We could be true friends——'

Suddenly, in a harsh voice quite unlike my normal tones, I said: 'Why did Tamara Jones run out of your class that day?'

'So that's what's worrying you! That old story! I simply scolded her for bad behaviour and she ran out of the room. It's as simple as that.'

'A girl doesn't run out of a classroom because of a sharp word.'

'An unbalanced little girl who likes her own way does.'

'I have no reason to think that Tamara was unbalanced.'

'Miss Grey, I am beginning to think you are unbalanced yourself. You come to this school as a novice, dig up a lot of past history, listen to silly stories told you by the children, then come to me and are extremely rude. Miss Bowling and I are doing our best to restore the school to normal after last term's tragedy. People like you do not help.'

'And have you a completely clear conscience about Tamara Jones?' I said steadily. My nervousness had gone now. I seemed to have acquired some hidden power, as if unseen forces had come to my aid.

'Get out of my way!' she said. She thrust me aside and reached the door.

'You haven't answered my question.'

She turned back, standing in the doorway. She said:

'Tamara Jones is dead. As far as I am concerned the whole business is finished and done with. The dead do not come back——' She stopped abruptly, staring at the fog-glazed window. Her face turned grey-white. Her eyes suddenly appeared enormous, cavernous with fear. She put out her hand to the lintel of the door, clung there for a second, then collapsed on the floor, her books scattered about her.

A child who was passing in the corridor gave a sharp scream. I knelt down by Miss Carruthers's prostrate body and said to the child:

'Fetch Mrs. Cromer as quickly as you can.' Nell was in charge of first aid in the school.

The child ran off as if devils were chasing her. I lifted Miss Carruthers as well as I could and tried to get her head between her knees. She was a thin, light woman, but an unconscious person is always extra heavy. As I struggled, she opened her eyes. They were full of terror. She said loudly: 'Don't let her in!'

'Keep still,' I said. 'You're all right now.'

She gave herself a slight shake, and her voice was more under control as she said: 'Certainly I'm all right.'

By the time Nell arrived Miss Carruthers was on her feet, protesting that she was quite well now—'Just an attack of dizziness. Leave me alone.'

Stiff and proud, white as death, she made her way along the corridor.

'What happened?' asked Nell.

'She had a fright, I think.'

'I'd better go with her.' Nell followed the erect figure.

I went back into the classroom and closed the door. The room was icy cold. The foggy windows stared blankly back at me, empty and grey.

'Tamara,' I said softly. 'Tamara, what are you trying to tell us?'

There was complete silence, grey stillness. Yet I felt I wasn't alone.

'Are you there, Tamara?'

Still no sign.

I sat down at the desk and covered my face with my hands, trying to relax, to make myself as receptive as possible to any influence that was in the room.

And when I uncovered my eyes, for a fleeting second I saw her—a little girl with red hair—standing by the window—looking at me with those great appealing eyes, trying to tell me something . . .

'Tamara!' As I spoke she vanished.

It had all happened so quickly that I might have imagined the whole thing in my over-excited mind.

'Tamara! Tamara!' I called.

But the room was empty and normal again. Except for the cold.

5

At the end of the afternoon the head mistress sent for me. She looked pale and angry.

'Come in, Miss Grey. Sit down,' she said coldly.

Trembling a little, I did so.

She came straight to the point.

'I have a complaint about you. Miss Carruthers has been to see me. She gave me a most surprising account of your behaviour towards her.'

'What did she say?'

'That you had the temerity to criticize her teaching methods and that you were extremely rude. Miss Grey, the staff of this school must support each other. That's what makes for the unity of a school. Whatever individual teachers may think of each other, they should try to control their likes and dislikes. I cannot have a trouble-maker on my staff.'

'I'm not a trouble-maker. The trouble is here already. Miss Bowling, perhaps you don't know everything that goes on here.'

'I think perhaps I know a little more than you do, Miss Grey,' she said. 'Miss Carruthers has been with me for ten years. She is brilliantly qualified and I depend on her a great deal. You have only been here a few weeks. You have had little experience with children, and I think you would do better to learn from the methods of more experienced teachers than to insult them. I simply will not put up with it.'

'I said nothing of Miss Carruthers's teaching methods. I'm sure they are excellent. It's the subject-matter of her lessons that worries me.'

'Indeed. Am I to conclude that you listen at keyholes?'

'That is an entirely uncalled-for remark!'

'Then how do you have this comprehensive knowledge of another teacher's lessons?'

'The children told me.'

I couldn't have said anything more foolish. She said scornfully: 'Haven't you even learnt not to listen to children's gossip against another member of staff? There is nothing more disloyal.'

'In normal circumstances I would agree with you. But these are not normal circumstances. I am firmly convinced that Form IIIA has been terrorized by this woman. Surely you must have suspected something when Tamara Jones had her accident last term?'

'So that's it! Rumours, rumours, rumours. I suppose I must expect unpleasant talk outside the school, but surely not within these walls!'

'Miss Bowling, don't you *care* what happens to the children in your school?'

She gave me a long, steady look.

'They're my life,' she said.

'Then don't ignore what I say just because I'm young and you don't know me well. Investigate it all yourself. Ask the children about Miss Carruthers's lessons. There is a greater loyalty than loyalty to one's staff. Say what you like to me—sack me if you like—but don't shut your eyes to unpleasantness.'

'You dislike Miss Carruthers very much, don't you, Miss Grey?'

'Yes—no—I don't know . . . ' In a way I liked her too much, could have loved her. Yet I hated her too. 'I hate her because of Tamara,' I said.

'Tamara, poor little girl, is dead. For God's sake let her rest.'

'Sometimes the dead cannot rest! Sometimes they come back to right a wrong!'

She looked so alarmed when I said this that I thought at last I was making headway. Her next remark destroyed this piece of wishful thinking.

'Miss Grey, I think perhaps you ought to see a doctor. You're in a highly nervous state, whether you realize it or not.'

'So you dismiss what I say by implying that I'm going mad,' I said bitterly.

'When you get to the stage of thinking that everyone is out of step except yourself—oh, but this has gone on long enough. I'm glad you've been frank with me, but I must make it clear that I will not have you stirring up trouble and rumours about another member of staff. If you continue in this way you will have to leave. I'm sorry to seem harsh. I think you're sincere. I also think you're not quite responsible for what you say and do at the moment. Now, go home, Miss Grey, get a long night's sleep and we'll forget all about it—as long as you behave yourself.'

She half smiled and rose to her feet.

I was dismissed.

Once outside her door I felt utterly exhausted. I remembered with wonder the way I had stood up to her. Usually I tended to crumple before authority. But I had changed since I came to this school. It was as if some power outside myself drove me on. In my tiredness, I wondered fearfully whether I *was* going off my head. Miss Bowling wasn't the only person to suggest it. Nell thought I was 'going round the bend'. Was I merely a pathetic victim of hallucinations and wild imaginings? I couldn't believe it. But I had heard that unbalanced people never do believe that there's anything wrong with them. They think everyone else is wrong.

'Everyone else is wrong,' I said aloud to the empty corridor.

'Hello, talking to yourself? That's the first sign!' said a cheerful voice. Nell was emerging from the staff room.

'You're late, Nell.'

'Hockey practice,' she grimaced. 'Are you coming to the station? I'll wait for you.'

'I'll just fetch my coat.'

She followed me back into the staff room. I collected my coat from the locker. Looking into the mirror to powder my nose I

was startled to see how thin and ill I looked, my face pale, great shadows under my eyes.

Nell said: 'What's the matter, Jean? You look ghastly. Bowling been ticking you off?'

'Yes. Don't ask me about it. I can't cope with any more tonight.'

'You're heading for a breakdown, my girl, if you don't pull yourself together. Why don't you see a doctor?'

'Because I'm not ill, Nell. I'm not ill!'

'All right, old thing. Keep your hair on.'

She took my arm as we went downstairs.

'Jean, you're shaking.'

'I'm cold, that's all.'

'Shall we have a cup of tea before catching our trains?'

'Yes, let's. Is there a café near the station?'

'There's the cinema café. We'll go there,' she said.

In the golden-lit café with its soft carpets we ordered tea and toasted buns. One or two solitary people sat at the tables having supper dishes—Welsh rarebits, poached eggs on toast, that sort of thing. The only noise was the muffled voices of the actors on the screen. These voices were suddenly magnified and seemed to push their way towards us each time the door to the 'circle' swung open to admit a new patron. I drank three cups of tea and smoked feverishly. Nell ate all the buns and chattered about her husband.

Then she returned to the subject of my health.

'Look at yourself!' she said. 'What you need is a tonic from the doctor, a new hair-do, a lot of outings with gay young men, one of whom will marry you in due course, and a job other than teaching. I've seen young women unsuited to teaching work themselves into breakdowns, and you're the type.'

'You're quite wrong. I like teaching. I like children.'

'Then have some of your own.'

'Without a husband? Mrs. Cromer, you shake me!'

'Half-wit!'

We laughed together. It was good to laugh at silly jokes, to be

with someone easy and kind and uncomplicated. I saw Nell smile and nod at someone behind me and glanced to see who it was.

A smart, grey-haired woman wearing spectacles with red frames had just come into the café. She went to a table by herself.

'Someone you know?' I said.

'Not really. It's Miss Avery, Tamara's aunt. I used to see her at prize-givings.'

'Introduce me to her.'

Nell gave me a sharp, suspicious glance and said: 'No. We're not having any more Tamara Jones nonsense. Miss Avery won't be in the least interested in you. Let her have her tea in peace.'

Miss Avery had produced a book from her large handbag and was reading as she drank her tea.

'Let's go,' said Nell. 'My poor husband will think I've deserted him.'

She insisted on paying the bill and we left together.

'This beartly fog!' said Nell, wrinkling her nose. 'We've had enough fog this winter to last for the next five years, I should think. I hate it.'

At the station we parted, she for her platform, I for mine. But when she had disappeared down the steps, I turned back and hurried to the café again.

I went straight to Miss Avery's table and said: 'May I speak to you for a moment please?'

She looked startled. She was wearing far more make-up than I'd realized before and that gave any facial expression she wore a certain exaggeration.

'I don't think I know you,' she said.

'My name's Jean Grey. I'm a teacher at the school. I want you to tell me something about Tamara.'

'You're sure you're not a reporter?'

'Definitely not.'

'Sit down, then, Miss Grey. I don't mind talking about my niece, but I can't think what you want to know.'

Her voice was affected, her face mask-like now with its thick layer of cream and powder.

‘I want to know the sort of person Tamara was. You must have been almost a mother to her. You’d know her better than anyone else.’

‘We were never very close. She had her own room where she read and worked and invited her little friend, Jenny something-or-other. I was never even remotely like a mother to her.’

‘Her mother was a ballet dancer, I believe.’

‘Still is. She tours Europe and America with a company. I wrote to her about Tamara’s accident. She showed about as much distress as one would over the death of a goldfish. You look shocked at my saying that. It is shocking, but it’s true. Tamara’s tragedy was that she was lonely, she needed love. I’m a cold-hearted person where children are concerned. They make me impatient. I often wish now I’d taken more trouble with Tamara, but it’s too late to wish that now. Remorse. It’s one of the worst things to suffer, Miss Grey. I suppose you’re too young to understand that. I had a little, lonely girl in my house, and I left her to lead her own life. I feel very much to blame for what happened.’

‘And because you feel to blame, you haven’t made many inquiries about the actual circumstances?’

‘I suppose that’s it. I’ve tried to forget it all. I manage all right in my waking hours. My dreams aren’t so clever.’

‘Why did you take Tamara in the first place if you feel indifferent to children?’

She shrugged. ‘I might as well tell you. I no longer have any pride in these matters. I was in love with her father. I thought if I took the child when her mother cast her off he might come to me, set up house with me and divorce his wife. But he didn’t. He went right away and I never saw him again. Occasionally he wrote. Business letters about money for Tamara. Every time I looked at that child I felt humiliation. She was a constant reminder that my little ruse had failed. And now you know what a dreadful person I am, do you really want to talk to me any more?’

'Only one thing more. You say 'Tamara was without love. That's a terrible thing for a child. Surely she turned to someone?'

'I believe she had a passion for one of the teachers. The woman who taught her English or history—I forget which—Miss—er—'

'Miss Carruthers.'

'Yes, that's it. Carruthers. A most charming woman. I saw her at the school prize-givings once or twice. I can quite understand schoolgirls falling a little in love with her.'

'But most girls who have "crushes" on teachers usually have other people to love as well—parents, friends, relations. Tamara had no one else.'

'No, unless you could count little Jenny. Do you know Jenny Logan? Funny little pudding of a girl. She adored Tamara. Gave her the same sort of worship that Tamara gave the Carruthers woman. Funny how love makes a tangle of your life even at that age. A loves B, B loves C, C loves D, D loves A. Like a Racine play. Mind you, I think Miss Carruthers was quite fond of Tamara in a quiet way. She invited her to tea a number of times.'

'Really? I didn't know that.'

'I don't think anyone at school knew. Tamara told me Miss Carruthers had said she wasn't to mention it to the others or they'd label her "teacher's pet". It was very kind of Miss Carruthers to take such an interest in Tamara.'

'Did Tamara tell you what happened at those tea-parties?'

'Not a thing. It was rather mysterious, really. She'd come home looking tired and over-excited, then go straight to her room. I recognized the symptoms of adolescent hero-worship and left her to it. All right, I neglected her. Say it, if you like. Do you think I don't know it?'

'Miss Avery, I'm not your judge.'

'I'm my own judge, jury and prosecutor.'

She stared down at the table-cloth, expressionless, her mouth quite still under the heavy layer of lipstick. I couldn't like her, but I was sorry for her.

'Don't blame yourself for Tamara's death,' I said impulsively. 'It wasn't your fault. I know it wasn't.'

'I wish I were so certain. Now, I'm afraid I must leave you, Miss Grey. I have an appointment. Perhaps we shall meet again some time?'

She left the café without more ado. I knew I had distressed her, but when I thought of that child, lonely and unloved, living with a woman who felt her presence a nuisance and a bitter reminder, I didn't care about Miss Violet Avery's feelings in the least.

Now, however, I felt a little nearer to understanding Tamara. She had been very lonely. She fell in love with a woman who was beautiful and clever. The woman showed her favour and kindness at first. Then that kindness turned into an exercise of power. Miss Carruthers liked power. She liked to have a young heart at her disposal. She liked to make a young creature gloriously happy one moment, utterly miserable the next. I could imagine her causing Tamara bitter distress by a cruel word or gesture, then restoring her to radiant happiness by a smile, a word, a touch. The loved one is all-powerful. The lover is helpless.

So it was with Tamara.

But what happened at those tea-parties? And what happened in that classroom? What did the teacher say to drive the child away in blind panic?

About thirty-five people had witnessed the scene—the children of IIIA.

Would they tell me? Or would they turn their closed, reserved little faces towards me and keep their secret. That was what was so queer about IIIA. They were children with a secret. Children afraid.

Children afraid.

6

WHEN I faced Form IIIA next morning in that icy-cold classroom where the blazing radiators fought a losing battle against some strange, chilling power, I was more than ever aware

of their communal fear. It crushed the laughter and the talkativeness one would expect from little girls of that age. They were unnaturally subdued.

I set them ~~to~~ ^{to} do, and there were no sighs or moans, no questions, pertinent or impertinent, only the obedience of indifference.

All the heads bent over books. Weary little heads. There was hardly a child who didn't show signs of strain. Doris showed it by a nervous fiddling with her pencil, Alice by sharp glances from side to side, Jenny by the unnatural stillness of her body and her paper-white face.

Yet here, among these unresponsive little people, was my opportunity to solve the mystery, and whatever happened I must take it. Perhaps I would only succeed in getting myself dismissed—Miss Bowling had made herself only too clear. But I had to try.

'Look up from your books, please,' I said quietly. 'I want to speak to you all.'

They looked up, blank-faced, allied against me with their secret.

'I want you to tell me what's worrying you. Anything you say to me here in confidence won't go outside this room. Doris, you're the form captain. Can't you, representing the form, tell me what's scaring you all?'

'I don't know what you mean,' she said.

The silence in the room was intense. I waited.

At last Alice Hughes burst out:

'Shall we tell her?'

'Yes, let's tell her'—'No, we shall only get into trouble'—'Suppose *she* found out'—'I'd like to tell Miss Grey'—'But what would *she* do if *she* knew?' The voices cut across each other in violent disagreement.

'I have just told you,' I said, 'that no one will find out what you tell me, unless you agree to it.'

'*She'd* find out somehow,' said Doris. 'She knows things without being there. She can do anything. If we say anything we

don't know what she'd do to us. Look what happened to Tamara.'

'What *did* happen to Tamara?' I asked sharply, commandingly. 'What happened on the day when Tamara ran out of this room? Jenny, you were Tamara's friend. You want to help her, don't you? Well, I think if you tell me what happened, it will help her.'

Jenny's eyes met mine, and for the first time I saw a glimmering of trust there. When she spoke it was in a whisper. We all seemed to be holding our breath so as not to miss a word.

'Miss Carruthers was talking to us,' she said. 'She'd given us back some homework, and when she came to Tamara's she said: "Not up to your usual standard. You take no trouble over your work, Tamara."'

'Tamara was keen on Miss Carruthers. Whenever Miss Carruthers said anything nasty to her, she'd cry and cry afterwards. None of the others knew that. I knew, because Tamara was my best friend. And I knew she always took a lot of trouble over her English homework, and it was good, because she'd let me read it. Tamara wrote wonderful essays and poems. Miss Carruthers knew that as well as we did. She was just being horrible.'

'When Tamara got her book back she didn't say anything, just sat staring at it. It was covered with red-ink marks and there was "D" scrawled at the bottom. I don't think she'd ever had a "D" for English in her life before. She'd always had "A" or "B+" or "B". I saw her swallow nothingness a few times and knew she was trying not to cry.'

'Even then Miss Carruthers couldn't leave her alone. She said: "I suppose you've been wasting time writing some of that extraordinarily childish doggerel you call poetry. Personally I would call it sentimental effusions of the worst kind. What was the name of the one you gave me the other day, Tamara? Oh, yes, 'Lady of My Delight'." She made it sound silly and one or two people giggled.'

Jenny cast a scornful glance at the class.

'Miss Carruthers went on: "I wonder whom it could have been

written for?" She knew perfectly well that Tamara wrote it for her, because she loved her so. You see, Miss Grey, Tamara had no one else. No one. Except me, and I didn't count. She gave everything she had to Miss Carruthers. I thought it was a wonderful poem. I was the only person she'd shown it to. When she said she was going to give it to Miss Carruthers, I told her not to. Somehow I thought *she* might laugh at it. Not because it was funny, but because she'd know that to laugh would be the way to hurt Tamara most.

'What she did then was worse than even I thought she could do. She went to her handbag, there on the desk.'

Jenny pointed to the desk, and re-created the scene so vividly that I could almost see the elegant handbag, so unlike the average portmanteau that teachers carry.

'She took out a piece of exercise paper. I saw Tamara's writing on it. You couldn't mistake it. Rather dashing sort of writing. She said:

' "The writing is that of a very affected, conceited little person. As for the poem! Well, perhaps the class would like to hear it."

'We didn't want to hear it, but we all sat there, not daring to move or speak. It wasn't so much *what* she'd said. Lots of teachers are catty and sarcastic when they're in a bad mood. But this was different. It was personal. She was *trying* to hurt Tamara. She was *enjoying* it, Miss Grey. Somehow the look on her face then was more awful than all the terrible things she tells us in those "history" lessons she gives. At least those things happened in the *past*. We can forget them when we go home to our parents. They only come into our dreams sometimes. But this was here and now. And it seemed all the more horrible because she has a beautiful face. Tamara says she has the most beautiful face in the world—Tamara said, I mean. Poor Tamara.'

Her voice died away for a second.

I said: 'Go on, Jenny, my dear. Tell me the rest.'

'She held up the paper with Tamara's poem on it and began to read it aloud. She'd only read the first line:

My love, my lady of delight . . . ,

when Tamara interrupted. She couldn't stand any more. She said: "Don't read it! Don't! Don't! It was for *you*. Didn't you know it was for you? Don't read it! I can't stand any more!"

'Miss Carruthers said: "Surely you're not ashamed of it, Tamara. You seemed enormously proud of it when you gave it to me. You were pink with pride, strawberry-ice pink." She looked at us, hoping we'd laugh, but this time nobody made a sound.

Tamara said: "It was for you, only you. Throw it away if you like. I know it's not good enough. But don't read it aloud to everyone!"

"Nonsense," said Miss Carruthers. "It will be good discipline for you. You've been getting very conceited lately, Tamara."

Tamara got up from her desk. She looked ghastly. She turned her head from side to side, like someone in a trap. I've never seen anyone look so unhappy. Then she gave a sort of cry, as if someone had hit her terribly hard, and she ran to the door.

'Miss Carruthers said: "Tamara, I forbid you to leave this room. Come back at once."

'When she used that voice, none of us dared disobey her. Tamara turned at the door and looked at her.

'I think she saw her then as she really was. I think she lost in one second everything she'd loved about Miss Carruthers. She saw ugliness, cruelty. She pressed herself hard against the door.

"Return to your place," Miss Carruthers said, "while I read your—er—masterpiece."

'Then Doris shouted out: "Leave her alone, you beast?"

'Several of the girls turned to look at Doris who flushed and tossed back her hair rather defiantly.

'It was what we were all wanting to say,' said Jenny. 'Miss Carruthers wheeled round and said:

"How dare you speak to me like that?"

'Her movement seemed to set Tamara free. She opened the door, slammed it hard behind her, and ran down the corridor so fast that I don't think anyone could have overtaken her.

'Miss Carruthers just shrugged her shoulders and said: "What

a disgraceful exhibition!" I asked if I could go after Tamara and see if she was all right. She wouldn't let me. She went on criticizing our homework as if nothing had happened. I can't remember what she said. I'd have given anything to have the courage to go after Tamara. I didn't know what she might do. I'd seen her face. So miserable. When I heard the scream outside and the screech of the brakes I knew it had something to do with Tamara. It was dreadfully foggy that day. All like a nightmare, the whole thing.

A few minutes later, one of the prefects came in and whispered to Miss Carruthers. She said: "I'll be along in a minute," and when the girl had gone she said to us:

"No one in this room is to mention a single word of what happened here this afternoon. If you speak of it to anyone, anywhere, I shall know. I warn you. You all know me well enough to realize how foolish it would be to disobey me. Apart from which, I'm very fond of you all and I know you want to please me, don't you?" She smiled at us. Some people love the way she smiles.

"You'd do anything for her when she smiles at you," murmured Alice. "When you're not with her you can think awful things about her, but when she smiles at you, is nice to you—you'd die for her."

"Tamara did die for her," said Doris grimly.

"No," corrected Jenny. "Tamara died *because* of her. It's different. I think that's why she—can't rest."

A queer stillness fell upon the room.

Then Doris said, in a rush: "We know she's dead, Miss Grey, but some of us have seen her. Just a glimpse. Especially when it's foggy like this. We feel she's here. Often with Jenny. That's why the room's always so cold. We daren't tell anyone. When Jenny talked about it she got into a most awful row with Miss Bowling. She was told that if she made up stories like that again she'd be sent away."

"You see, Miss Grey," said Jenny, "grown-up people don't

believe in ghosts, not even good ghosts. You think, like Miss Bowling, that I imagined seeing Tamara, don't you?"

I said: 'I think that only people who do believe in ghosts see them, and young people, like you, are more receptive to such influences than older people. Our armour of everyday habit and life is stronger.'

'Tamara was very sweet,' said Jenny, her voice trembling now. She had told her story with clarity and power, almost as if some outside influence had been helping her. Now she was a plump little girl again, a little girl without much power of self-expression, and, on the verge of tears, she said: 'I want her to rest. I don't mind feeling her near me sometimes. I couldn't be afraid of Tamara. But I want her to rest—to have what she wants—and then to go to sleep. I loved her. Oh, I loved her!'

'She must have been a very sweet and lovable person,' I said. 'I'm glad I've been told about her. And I hope it's helped you all a little just to talk about it. When you're afraid, it's always better to bring your fear out into the open, not hide it away in dark corners until it becomes so huge and black that it overshadows your whole life. I'll think about all Jenny has told me. I'll try to find some solution to it all. Meantime, keep your courage up—bless you!'

The end-of-lesson bell rang as I spoke.

'What's your next class?' I asked.

'Gym,' several of them said together.

'Well, I hope turning upside down and inside out on those horrible bars and ropes will warm you up and drive away some of the cobwebs,' I said.

Some of them laughed. They all looked a little less edgy. It was a small victory.

Jenny was at the end of the line as they filed out. I said to her:

'Thank you for telling me, for trusting me.'

'I do trust you now; though I didn't at first,' she said with her little controlled smile. 'You see, Tamara trusts you. You know, Miss Grey, you look rather like Tamara, with your red hair.'

7

THAT evening I stayed in the staff room marking books after school hours. Most of the staff had dashed off to join the bus queues of children, among whom there was no priority for staff (and quite right too). Misty darkness had clamped down on the streets and houses, but the staff room was cosy with its bright electric fire, the one light shining over the table where I worked, and the pleasant fug of my own cigarette-smoke.

While I automatically slashed at spelling mistakes and wrote almost illegible comments at the foot of the children's exercises—teachers take second place to doctors for bad writing—my mind was still with Form IIIA and the story Jenny had told.

I still had no idea what action I could take. It was hopeless to go to Miss Bowling. She already looked on me as a neurotic. Nell was sceptical. I could expect no help from her. She'd only suggest putting IIIA permanently on the hockey field!

My pencil ceased to move over the pages of childish scrawl, and I sat for a moment with my head in my hands.

A sound startled me. I jerked round.

My eyes, accustomed to the glare of the light, could only make out at first that the door had opened and that someone was standing there.

'Working late?' said the low, beautiful, familiar voice.

'Yes, Miss Carruthers.' I turned back to my books.

'You didn't look as if you were working very hard.'

There was kindly amusement in her voice.

'Poor child,' she went on. 'You're tired, aren't you? It's always a strain being at a new school.'

She came and stood by the fire, twisting her white hands, warming palm and back of hand alternately with a rhythmic movement. My heart beat so hard I was afraid she would hear it. I was afraid of her.

'I wish you wouldn't be frightened of me,' she said softly. 'I like you so much. I'm sorry if I was harsh the other day. We both

lost our tempers and said things we didn't mean. Shall we forget all about it? "Kiss and make up", I believe the children say.'

• She smiled at me, that beautiful smile with its sad, ironical little twist.

'I can't forget,' I said.

'Oh, come now! If I can—after all, I was the one attacked, wasn't I? Do you really hate me so much? When you first came here, I thought we might be friends. The other members of staff—well, I suppose they're worthy enough—but dull. You're different. You're not the average teacher by any means. Sometimes I get so bored here, surrounded by these women who talk of nothing but lessons and household hints.' I sympathized with her there. I too found the conversation of most women dull in the extreme. 'But you,' she went on, 'have a mind. A sensitive mind. It's a rarity, believe me. And then you're lonely, as I am lonely.'

'Yes, sometimes I'm lonely,' I admitted, making my voice as friendly as possible. I or now I knew what I had to do. I must make friends with her, find out what she was really like. That was the only way to defeat this woman in the long run. She must be defeated. That I knew more surely than anything I had ever known in my life before.

But there was danger. The danger that, for all my cool scheming, I might truly fall under the spell of her undeniable charm. Even now I caught my breath at her beauty as she sat by the fire, its glow giving her face softness and warmth, her eyes so large and dark, her hands moving gracefully as they warmed themselves, appearing to be almost independent creatures with a will of their own.

She said: 'I thought perhaps, when you've finished your marking, you might like to come and have tea with me.'

'To your house, you mean?'

'To my house.' She looked amused. 'You needn't look so doubtful, Miss Grey. Apart from the cobwebs hanging from the ceiling, the bats in the rafters and the troglodyte in the cellar, it's a very nice house.'

I laughed aloud, and she joined in.

'So you'll come?' she said. For all her pretence of gaiety and casualness, I noticed tension in her voice now. Suddenly I realized: She's afraid to be alone.

'Thank you,' I said. 'I'd like to come very much. I won't do any more of this marking. It can wait till morning.'

Together we made our way through the silent corridors. There is something lost and uncanny about a school at night. The desks crouch like small dark creatures waiting for young occupants to bring them to life again. The blackboards tell their tales of lessons past and already forgotten—outline maps with towns and rivers marked in coloured chalk, half-finished sums, history notes which have been laboriously copied down, geometrical figures drawn with a dexterous hand, and occasionally a guilty little game of noughts and crosses chalk-etched in a corner of the board by two young imps when the teacher had left the room. By morning all these would be cleaned away as if they had never been. The end of each school day was a little death. Only the ghosts of the past haunted the empty rooms.

I wondered whether the sad little shadow of Tamara still waited in that cold classroom, hopeless, unwanted, her mission yet unfulfilled. 'I want her to rest—to have what she wants—and then to go to sleep,' Jenny had said. I shivered, and Miss Carruthers said:

'Yes, it's eerie when everyone's gone, isn't it? It's strangely peopled for all its emptiness.'

'One feels like a trespasser,' I agreed.

'Later on the school bursts into a quite different form of life. The cleaners arrive. They shout cheerful remarks to each other from one end of the corridor to the other as they mop and scrub, such as: "How's your rheumatics today, dear? Mine's something chronic. Must be the damp weather . . ." or the dry weather, or the cold weather, or whatever the weather happens to be. Touching the way people often attribute their ills to the weather. Failing their current illnesses, there are their operations. "I must show you my gallstones some time." Or, failing that, their

husbands. Their "old men", as they call them. The old man" is always under the weather, or on the beer, or in the clink. One could write a whole book about the night life of a school. One char even had a baby on the premises one night many years ago. It—a boy, I believe—came into the world in the biology lab.'

'But how appropriate!'

'Yes, wasn't it? Personally, I think the school would have had a perfect right to claim it for dissecting purposes, like a superior frog. What fun and games for the fifth forms, sex education starting from scratch! Not that I think our biology mistress would know which sex it was. I don't think she's interested in statuary, and that's the only way some people get to know, isn't it?'

She prattled away in this surprisingly ribald manner until we reached the main entrance. I had the feeling that she was talking just to hear her own voice, to keep fears at bay.

'Which is the biology teacher?' I asked. 'I haven't sorted them all out yet, especially the ones who live in their labs and never come to the staff room.'

'She's the one who looks like a rabbit, all teeth and twitch, and is always carrying a jar of tadpoles or the carcass of a rabbit.'

'Oh, I know the one!' I couldn't help laughing at the apt description, unkind though it was.

'Anyone else you want to ask about? You know Miss Denby, of course. The one with the ankle socks. I saw her luring you into that depressing institution known as the N.U.T. Suitable initials when you look at the members, I always think. Scripture teachers usually wear ankle socks. Warm feet bring one nearer to heaven. The Lord is all against the vanity of fine nylons, hence He gives people like you and me cold feet.'

'I'd rather have feet like icebergs than wear ankle socks,' I admitted.

'So would I. I feel the same about pixie hoods. Denby wears one of those sometimes. A red one.'

'I've seen her in it.'

We convulsed with almost hysterical laughter.

'Oh, Miss Grey, you really should have seen the time when she

was going on a climbing holiday. She had to come to morning school on the last day of term and was going straight to the station to catch a train in the afternoon. She came into the staff room in hobnailed boots, sounding like Frankenstein's monster—clomp, clomp, clomp. She was wearing a mackintosh, although it was a blazing hot day. The little hood was hanging coyly down the side of her face, and on her back was an enormous rucksack. None of us in the staff room dared look at each other as she began to peel.'

'Peel?'

'Yes. Like skinning a banana. Her legs are just like peeled bananas, incidentally, in colour and texture. First she peeled off the rucksack, from which fell a tin of corned beef. Then came hood and mack. After that two cardigans, one green, one a glamorous cyclamen. Soon she was standing there in a skimpy little summer dress with a faded flower pattern and those enormous climbing boots. She clumped back and forth between lockers and table, and poor Mrs. Cromer was so overcome she had to rush from the room with a terrible snort which she tried to turn into a cough. All Denby said was: "I hope Miss Bowling won't mind my not wearing stockings," then she thundered off to her Scripture class.'

I was shaking with laughter by the time she had finished, then I sighed and said. 'It must be lovely to be so unself-conscious. She's a kind soul really.'

'But one should have a little mercy on the people who have to look at one. Ah, here's the bus stop. I almost missed it in the fog. One night I stood behind a tree for ten minutes and wondered why none of the buses stopped for me.'

We only had a short time to wait for the bus, and when it came it seemed warm, friendly and normal, bumbling redly along, its gold lights carving a path through the murk. I had to admit that it was much more fun going home with Miss Carruthers than trailing back alone to my own flat. Surely she couldn't be so black as the children painted her! She was gay, clever, friendly—

and nervous. Her face looked strained in spite of her efforts to amuse me.

When we reached her house, she said:

'How nice it is not to come in alone. That's the advantage of living in a flat rather than a house. You don't feel so isolated. You're in a flat, aren't you, Miss Grey?'

'Yes, but you can feel just as lonely surrounded by people as in a house by yourself.'

'Perhaps. Anyway, neither of us is alone tonight. We'll eat an enormous tea and forget about the fog and the school and all our troubles.'

She took me into her attractively furnished living-room and I lit the fire, which was already laid, while she made tea and toast and poached eggs.

After we had eaten, she said: 'You don't mind if I change, do you? I hate wearing the same clothes I've worn all day at school.'

'Of course not. Just pretend I'm not here.'

'I wouldn't want to do that. I'm so very, very glad you *are* here,' she said, smiling. 'Oh, my dear, it is sweet of you to come.'

'I'm enjoying myself enormously,' I said honestly, for in spite of my former resolutions to observe her coldly her charm was proving too much for me. It was true what Alice Hughes had said: 'When you're not with her you can think awful things about her, but when she smiles at you, is nice to you—you'd die for her.'

Or die *because* of her.

I mustn't forget Tamara. I mustn't forget.

When she came back into the room she was wearing a long red housecoat which swirled about her feet. The Elizabethan collar formed a perfect frame for her face.

'You look marvellous in that!' I said impulsively.

'Not like a school teacher?'

'Not a bit like a school teacher!'

'Than which there is no greater compliment—to a school teacher.'

'Miss Cairuthers, why did you take up teaching?'

She stood by the fire, very straight and slim in her long red gown, and did not answer for a second.

Then she said: 'I need someone to confide in, Jean. I haven't really talked to anyone for years and years—not of myself, that is. I took up teaching because I wanted power.'

'Power,' I murmured. 'That's something I've never wanted.'

'It's the only thing worth wanting. Power. You can't touch it, or steal it, or buy it. Either it's born in you or it isn't. If it is born in you, you must exercise it. Power over people. Over their minds. And no minds are more interesting to play with than those of children. Virgin soil. With a child's mind you can do almost anything. There are no deep prejudices to overcome. A few surface ones passed on by parents, perhaps, but nothing deep-rooted. On a child's delicate mind you can play as if it were a musical instrument. You can make sweet music, or hideous music, sad melodies or happy ones. You can create a person according to your will. If you wish, you can destroy the person, just as you can destroy a book you write or a song you compose.'

I summoned all my courage and said: 'So that is how you destroyed the little girl with red hair. The child who loved you. You used her love as a sacrifice to your own love of power. You made her, and broke her. My God, how could you have been so cruel?'

She turned to me, face white, eyes staring.

'What do you know of cruelty?' she said. 'Nothing! I can tell by your face. Your innocence. You're like a child yourself. Even now you don't know half of what Tamara knew, or what many of the other children at the school know about life . . .'

'After your expert lessons on the subject, I suppose.'

'I can tell you about cruelty,' she said. 'I'll tell you of the things that happened to me. Then blame me for taking my vengeance on the world and the people in it! Blame me if you dare!'

8

SHE crouched down by the fire now and pushed her hands towards it with that familiar rhythmic gesture. I was reminded of tentacles moving in deep water, smooth, indomitable. She said:

'One of my earliest memories is of being frightened by my mother. When no one else was about, she would strike me for no just reason, merely for the pleasure of hearing me cry out. When other people were there, she was effusive with me, all kisses and caresses, and I would respond because I knew it would be worse for me afterwards if I didn't. My father must, I think, have been a weak man. I don't remember him. At first he was just a big dark shape whose presence protected me temporarily from Mother's unwarranted blows. Then he went away. Left my mother for someone else. I bore the full brunt of her malice.'

She paused and shivered, as if the warmth of the fire no longer reached her, as if she were suddenly cut off by a glass wall from the room and me and everything tangible about us.

'As I grew older,' she went on, 'I discovered why she treated me as she did. She had never wanted children. She had been an actress and said that having a child had ruined her career. What I suspect now is that she would never have been a successful actress and my presence made a fine excuse for her failure. I was too young to realize that at the time. I grew up thinking that I'd ruined my mother's brilliant career by my crime of being born.'

'How terrible!' I murmured, thinking of all the wanted children, the loved children, who took the fact of their welcome into the world for granted.

'When I was old enough to think and understand she turned to the delights of mental cruelty. She sneered at my looks—"What had she done to deserve so plain a child?"'

'You? Plain?'

'Oh yes, I was plain. I was sallow, solemn, nervous. I never laughed. Beauty is so much a matter of confidence, and I had no confidence whatever. I tried to do things on my own, things that

Mother couldn't interfere with. I wrote poems and stories. She found them out, took away my puny efforts, and on one horrible day read them aloud amid laughter to a company of people. I never forgave her. It was worse than all the rest. I tried to paint, hiding my daubs under the bed in my room. She dragged them out, hung them up in a prominent position for people to laugh at. When I sometimes read plays aloud to myself, trying to find a fantasy world in which to hide, she sneered at my attempts at acting, until I hardly dared open my mouth for fear of the mocking laughter.'

The mocking laughter. I seemed to hear it in the air about us, as if the woman who had so hated her child still cast her shadow over that child's adult life. She was there in the room with us, still mocking her daughter—the daughter who never laughed—who had no confidence. . . .

'She was too strong for me in every way,' Miss Carruthers cried out, her voice harsh with remembered pain. 'I tried to avoid things that could bring ridicule down on my head—although that was almost impossible. All the time she could scoff at my looks, my clothes, my way of eating and drinking, my clumsiness. But I hid away within myself. I discovered that good behaviour, kindness, virtue, didn't pay. Evil was so much stronger. I learnt to lie and deceive. My whole life was spent in avoiding my mother's cruelty and I was utterly miserable until I found my secret revenge.'

'Secret revenge?' I whispered.

'Yes. Quite secret. Wonderfully effective. In my mind I learnt to torture my mother. I read all the books I could on torture, witchcraft and atrocities. I read them avidly and, in my imagination, practised every one of them on my mother. Then I found that just talking of such things to other children at school frightened them. I had been frightened. Why shouldn't they? They were so silly, so babyish. If they'd had to endure half that I'd had they'd have collapsed in eternal tears. But I had grown to care no longer what my mother said to me. If she greeted me in the morning with "You're looking even more unprepossessing

than usual this morning, my dear. What have I done to deserve such a gargoyle of a child?" I would make no answer, simply perform on her, in my mind, some ghastly torture. Perhaps my thoughts showed a little in my face. Sometimes she gave me an almost frightened look, and that gave me momentary pleasure.'

'Your life with her must have been a living hell.'

She laughed unexpectedly, a harsh, unpleasant sound. 'Not entirely,' she said. 'As I grew older we achieved a sort of happiness. We enjoyed torturing each other, she openly, I secretly. Then the idea got a grip on me and I didn't stop short at my mother. Anyone who crossed my path or got in my way received "the treatment". I'd look at the person, think my cruel thoughts, and in time they'd shrink away a little and they wouldn't be so quick to scold me another time.'

'Of course it was all very crude, but it did give me a sense of my own power. I had suffered, others should suffer too. That was just.'

'Bitter justice!'

'Justice all the same. When I was away from my mother I found myself imitating her turns of phrase, using on other children the unkind, ridiculing things she'd said to me. I saw the fascination of hurting people. The delight of making someone squirm. How I despised and hated my school-fellows with their smug suburban homes and their sentimental parents. Gushing mothers eternally wearing floral aprons and cooking enormous meals. Half-baked fathers with bowler hats and brief-cases, catching the same bus every morning. The smugness of them all!

'Yet I soon found that children who belonged to a family were the least easy to hurt. The vulnerable ones were the lonely ones.'

She repeated the phrase with pleasure: 'The lonely ones! The ones who lived with a guardian, or with only one parent who was out a great deal, or with parents who both had careers and to whom the child was unimportant. But such torturing was small delight compared with the new power I found over my mother. You see, she grew old.'

'You showed her no mercy?'

'Why should I? As my power grew, hers diminished. Youth was on my side. With delight I watched age invade and seize her. I saw her carefully tinting her red hair where it was streaked with grey, dabbing lotions on her face to hide the lines, and I'd say: "You can't conceal your age, Mother."

'That remark hurt her more than any other, and I learnt to use it, or variations of it, whenever possible. As my confidence increased, my looks improved. My sallowness became an interesting pallor. My features, which had been too strongly marked for prettiness in childhood, were handsome in an adult, and by the time I was college age I was adult. Indeed, I was old. I felt years older than my contemporaries. I sensed that people were afraid of me. They felt something queer about me. With my newly found power I counteracted this by being nice to people when I felt like it. I found that I could be gay and amusing when I chose.'

How true that was! No one could be more charming. And how evilly dangerous was that all-pervading charm!

'I was never very popular with the men students,' she said. 'Poor conceited creatures they are. They hate clever women. It hurts their vanity. But with girls I could do anything. I had a group of friends who looked on me as their leader. And my mother was dying.'

'She had an incurable disease. Remembering what I had suffered at her hands, I enjoyed seeing her suffer. I wanted her to die.'

Suddenly I felt sick and faint. I wished she would stop, but her voice went on, as if she had kept all this to herself for years and years and now must speak.

'On the night she died,' continued the cruel, quiet voice, 'I felt truly free for the first time in my life. It was several weeks after her funeral that I began to miss her. Everything I had done in life had been aimed at her. All the time I'd been "showing" her. Now there was no one to "show". No one cared. No one loved or hated me. I felt as if I'd ceased to exist.'

'But was your youth *all* hatred? Surely there must have been someone . . .'

'Yes, there was someone. There followed two years which I cannot even now bear to remember. There was someone. I fell in love. Completely. Hopelessly. All my carefully cultivated power seemed to vanish. I could no longer control my feelings. You see, I was so unfamiliar with love. I had never loved anyone before, only hated. Love came to me like a revelation. It made everything else seem second best. My whole life was golden-lit by it. I couldn't imagine how I'd got through the days before I began to love.'

'Who was he?'

'A lecturer at the college, not unlike my mother in an odd sort of way - ruthless, handsome, with red-brown hair. He was brilliantly clever. He was married. His wife and children meant nothing to me. I think he loved me a little. Even now I have to believe that. But when he realized that I wanted him to divorce his wife and marry me, he refused.'

'“After all, my dear, it has been wearing rather thin lately, hasn't it?” Wearing rather thin. Terrible words! Wearing rather thin.'

'On the night he left me, I turned to my collection of books which contained the tortures which had comforted me in my childhood. I practised every one of them on him. Through the night, and through the dead little hours of the morning. I cured myself of love by the strength and beauty of evil. The beauty of evil. I had never been so keenly aware of it as I was that night.'

'For months I was obsessed by my thoughts of this man, my love and hatred of him. I finished my college career under his shadow. I worked hard and got a first-class degree just to “show” him, then I left and started my career as a teacher.'

That such a woman, so savagely warped and twisted, should be a teacher! It was a nightmare!

'From the very first I realized I had great power over children,' she went on, quietly, smoothly. 'I never had any of the disciplinary troubles that most young teachers endure for the first year

or so. After a term of teaching, I knew that I had found my vocation, the most fascinating profession in the world, influencing the minds of the young. I can discipline them the way I want them to be, give them knowledge that they will acquire from no one else, inspire them to work beyond their natural capacities—my examination successes every year are outstanding. If a child disappoints me, she suffers for it. Power. It's the only thing in the world worth having, Miss Grey. Power over the young is the most exciting power of all.'

There was a long silence. I sat very still, staring in horror at the woman who looked so beautiful and who was so evil. Yet for all my horror I could not truly hate her now. I thought of my own childhood, sheltered by kindly parents. How would I have developed if I'd had the treatment this woman had received? At least she had courage. The courage to fight back with every weapon at her command. She had grown so accustomed to those weapons that she went on fighting when there was no need—exercising power because it had become the only pleasure she knew.

'Why have you told me all this?' I asked.

She answered: 'I wanted you to understand. The others on the staff are afraid of me. You were a little afraid, but you stood up to me. I admired the way you tackled me the other day. I need a friend. Jean, I'm lonely. I'm terribly lonely. Lately, I've been afraid. Like a child afraid of the dark.'

'But you *live* in the dark,' I said. 'You want me to come into the darkness with you—into that world of power and hate that you've created! You've made your own darkness. Now you've got to live in it alone.'

'Do you hate me so much?' she said, and I saw the strain and fear in her face. For beneath that obsession for power was a streak of humanity, a glimpse of the person she might have been if her youth had been different. That person, that ordinary human being, was struggling in the dark—but struggling too late.

'I don't hate you,' I said. 'I pity you.'

Her expression hardened, and she gave me that look of cold contempt that must have made Tamara and other children

blanch and shiver. It did not hurt me, because I had no love for her. But if I had loved her, and I could have loved her, I would have wanted to die of grief.

'You pity me?' she said. 'A plain-faced scrag of a girl—so commonplace—so simple—you pity me!' She laughed. 'Take your pity home, Miss Grey. I want none of it.'

I rose to go. She turned her face away and stared into the fire. Her hands moved restlessly, ceaselessly. As I reached the door, my pity for her seized me more strongly than ever. She was so alone with the terrors created in her own mind, her terrible memories of cruel acts received and performed. She had turned to me, and I had rejected her. She still fascinated me and I stood for a second, unable to leave.

She sensed my hesitation, turned and smiled. The smile caught at my heart, made me want to do things for her, anything she asked.

'Jean,' she said, holding out her hand. 'Don't leave me tonight. I don't want to be alone in this house tonight.'

Then I found an unexpected power of cruelty within myself. I said:

'You will always be alone, for the rest of your life, except for the ghosts which haunt you.'

I ran out of the room and to the front door. I was weak and trembling now, feeling as if I had been in some dreadful nightmare for hours and hours. As I stumbled down the steps to the path which led to the gate, I glanced back at the house.

At first it showed only dimly black in its shroud of fog, then gold light flashed out as a curtain was opened. For a moment I saw the glow of her red gown at the window, the whiteness of her face. It was the face of a woman in mortal terror, all beauty gone, only the pitiful ugliness of fear. I had seen her look like that before, that day in the classroom, when she had said: 'The dead do not return,' then stared at the window.

She pressed her hands against the pane, fingers like short, white, flattened tentacles, and her lips mouthed the words:

'Come back! Don't leave me alone!'

I ran and ran until the fog closed round me and the house might never have been.

9

ALL the way home I couldn't get the face of the terrified woman out of my mind. Several times I almost turned back. It was dreadful to leave someone alone with fear. I imagined her now, pacing up and down her room, starting at shadows, listening to the silence. She had explored too far into the dark and now, when there was no drawing back, she was irretrievably trapped.

Perhaps I could have helped her. But if I did, I would only strengthen the power she had already over the helpless. Fear made her cruel, and her cruelty made her more afraid. A vicious circle.

Earlier in the evening I had been convinced that her influence must be destroyed before it could do further harm. Now, having heard her outburst, having sensed her terror, I knew that in time she would destroy herself. Already the fabric of evil was fraying. She would burn herself out in the dark fires of her own making.

Midnight struck as I reached my flat. I was cold to the bone, as if the fog had crept beneath my clothes and clung clammily to my skin. I switched on the fire, changed into pyjamas and warm dressing-gown, and made a quantity of black coffee. I sat drinking it, cup after cup, taking sensuous pleasure in the warmth that tingled through me. I smoked one cigarette after another until the room was blue-misted. Sleep was far away. I dreaded the thought of lying down in darkness, seeing her face more clearly. Her face was in my mind's eye now, clearer still when I closed my eyes.

At last, huddled in the chair by the fire, I did close my eyes. My thoughts turned immediately to half-waking dreams, the sort of swift, vivid dreams that come when one dozes off in a railway carriage, hypnotized by the regular rhythm of the train.

I dreamt that I was running through fog-bound streets and that she was following, calling to me, begging me to stop. Yet I knew that for all the appeal in her voice if I did stop I would feel her hands clinging to me and I would never be able to shake them off. I dreamt that the hands came nearer and nearer, that they grew enormously, the fingers stretching out to wind themselves round my throat, my limbs, my heart. I tore at them with half-paralysed hands, gasped and choked.

Then, suddenly, the long strong fingers lost all life and energy. As I tore them away from me, they were so much dead flesh, making no resistance. Shuddering with horror, I jerked awake, then stared at the floor, half expecting to see the tentacles of dead flesh lying scattered and twirled at my feet.

The nightmare still with me, I heated more coffee, lit another cigarette, decided I mustn't let myself fall asleep again.

Deciding to read myself awake, I opened the novel I had borrowed from the library a couple of days ago. What ghastly illustrations! I thought. Then realized with a sense of shock that it wasn't my novel at all. I'd had it in my hand when I went home with Miss Carruthers, had put it down on her hall table, and must have picked up the wrong book in my headlong flight to freedom. The book was called *Passport to the Dark*. There was no publisher's name on it. It looked as if it had been printed privately. Its closely printed pages were crammed with vile thoughts and deeds which I cannot write about or speak aloud. There was no author's name in the book, but I knew from the framing of the sentences, the words used, the swift, vivid style, who had written it. The phrase 'the beauty of evil' recurred several times. And the book had an evil brilliance that was almost beautiful. What a waste! I thought. My God, what a waste!

My worst shock was yet to come.

There was a hand-written inscription at the front of the book: 'To Tamara—with love.'

I tore up the book, page by page, and burnt it.

It was then that Tamara came to me. Perhaps I only dreamed it. Perhaps my own thoughts of Tamara were so strong at that

moment that I myself created her appearance. But I looked up to see her standing there, small, slender, gentle, with her glowing red hair.

Suddenly she smiled. She put out her hand and touched my brow. Unafraid, I put out my hands to her. But there was no one there.

I turned to the window, and saw the pale light of morning creep round the edge of the curtains.

10

As soon as I entered the staff room that morning I sensed that something had happened. The staff were talking quietly in small groups and fragments of conversation reached me: 'Terrible'—'No one knows how it could have happened'—'Miss Bowling's terribly upset'—'Tell the children at assembly.'

I went over to Nell and said: 'What's up? You all look very tense.'

'Haven't you heard? It's Miss Carruthers. She had an accident last night. Jean, she's dead.'

'Dead. Oh, I should have stayed . . .'

'Stayed? Why, were you with her last night?'

'I had tea with her, at her house.'

'Was she all right when you left her?'

'She was—upset.'

'What about? I can't imagine Carruthers being upset about anything. It shows how little you know about people, even when you meet them every day. Of course, she had that faint the other day. Perhaps she was ill and we didn't know.'

'What sort of accident was it, Nell?'

'She fell out of her bedroom window, on the top floor of her house.'

'Fell?' I said.

'That's what they say. Though I don't see how anyone on a

night like last night, would lean out of a window so far that she'd fall. Miss Carruthers wasn't the open-air type either. I know I used to disagree with her about it, say the fug wasn't good for children when she closed classroom windows. She said she liked her classroom closed in. Closed in. She was like that herself. All shut away inside herself. It's no good my pretending I ever liked her, Jean, because I didn't, but when I think of how unhappy she must have been to do a thing like this—and we never guessed. I say, it *has* upset you, hasn't it?"

My knees had turned weak and I sat down quickly.

'I should have stayed,' was all I could think or say.

'Did she ask you to?'

'Yes. Asked me. Begged me. I turned away. I left her in the dark. How could I have been so cruel?'

'Poor old Carruthers,' said Nell. 'What exactly did she say to you, Jean? Did she tell you anything?'

Nell was cheering up as she sensed a mystery, her face curious and avid. People were hateful, even the nicest of them.

'I can't talk about it, Nell. I had no idea she'd do a thing like this.'

'Perhaps it really *was* an accident, unlikely, as it seems. We shall never know. Dead! Isn't it queer? I wouldn't be really surprised if she walked into this staff room and said "What's all the fuss about?" in that superior voice of hers. The place won't seem the same without her.'

I murmured to myself: 'Perhaps Tamara can rest now.'

Nell looked at me in dismay: 'For goodness' sake don't start that Tamara business again. Miss Bowling will have enough to cope with without that. It's rotten for her, all this. First Tamara's accident, now Miss Carruthers's. She'll need all the help we can give her.'

'I quite agree, Mrs. Cromer,' said Miss Denby, interrupting us. 'This isn't a time for sitting about and moping,' and she cast a severe glance at me.

Momentarily I saw her as Miss Carruthers had described her to me the night before, when we'd been so gay and frivolously

catty together about the staff—I saw her in the big climbing boots, the rucksack, the tin of corned beef toppling down, and I laughed.

‘She’s upset,’ said Nell quickly. ‘She’s not much more than a kid herself. Pull yourself together, Jean! We shall have to go down to assembly in a minute. I expect Miss Bowling will tell the children.’

The bell rang for assembly, as she spoke.

We trooped down to the hall and reached our places just as the children were filing in. They were very quiet, but there was an air of tension and excitement about them.

When the hymn had been sung and prayers intoned, Miss Bowling addressed the girls. She looked small and insignificant on the big platform, but she had the practised diction of one accustomed to addressing a hall full of people and her clear voice reached the farthest corners.

‘Some of you may already have heard of the tragedy that befell our school last night,’ she said. ‘Miss Carruthers, who has taught at this school for ten years, had a serious accident. She did not recover. There is very little that I can say. This has come as a tremendous shock to me, as it will to you. All we can do is remember her. Remember her brilliance, her enthusiasm. I am sure those of you who have been in her classes will not forget her. Those of you who have attained scholastic success partly through her—and there are many of you—will always be grateful to her. In our minds she will always live.’

‘That is her memorial.’

There was utter silence. Some of the children had tears on their cheeks. Others looked secretly relieved. On no single face did I see indifference. There was grief, or pleasure. No half measures.

Miss Bowling then said another short prayer and assembly was dismissed.

The children went back to their classrooms. When I reached IIIA for my first lesson, they were sitting stiffly at their desks. One or two were weeping softly.

'Steady now,' I said. 'We have to get over these things. Life must go on.'

These platitudes had some effect. The sniffing stopped. Then Doris blurted out:

'Miss Grey, haven't you noticed? The room's warm.'

What she said was true. That unearthly chill which had gripped the classroom for weeks had vanished.

The sun was shining in at the window. Jenny sat with a shaft of sunlight on her hair. She looked impassive, ordinary. Looking at her I could hardly believe that she was the child who had, only the day before, brought a classroom scene to vivid life so that I almost felt I'd been there myself. When she felt my eyes on her, she looked up, gave me her little tight smile, and said:

'She's gone. Tamara's gone. I think she can rest now.'

'It's a wonderful day. The fog's all gone,' said Alice.

'Marvellous to see the sun again'—'So lovely and warm'—'It'll soon be spring.' They all began to talk at once, their faces brighter, lighter. It was as if, having recovered from the shock of Miss Bowling's news, they were at last emerging from the dark, into the beauty of daylight.

'My father took me to a wonderful film last night, Miss Grey. It all took place at the seaside, in the sun, and it was about things that happened to some children on their summer holiday,' said one little girl.

'Oh, I saw that,' said another. 'It was super!'

'I suppose you're all ardent film fans,' I smiled.

'I'd rather have TV'—'I like Westerns'—'Oh, no, the Walt Disneys are best'—'No, the crime ones—lots of shooting.' They were all chattering away like little birds, making an unconscionable noise, but I hadn't the heart to stop them. It was good to see them behaving like natural children at last, good to be with them, good to have helped them, however little, and to have won their trust. I remembered my waking dream of Tamara in the early morning. How she had smiled.

Children should always be able to smile.

That evening I went to Miss Carruthers's house.

Sunsets filled the sky, purple and gold, green, silver and blue painted the clouds like butterfly wings. The house stood grey and silent, yet not sinister as it had seemed in the fog the night before. An ordinary house. Empty now. But people would move into it. It would be filled with voices and laughter and the clatter of feet. Its past would be forgotten.

I looked up at the top window, the window from which Miss Carruthers must have fallen. Again I felt that terrible onrush of pity and remorse. I would have to live with that for the rest of my days.

'I saw her,' said a small voice beside me.

I looked down. A little girl was standing there. She wasn't one of my own pupils. She was a grubby little thing, rather plump, with straight black hair cut short and with a solemn fringe across her brow.

'Whom did you see?' I asked.

'I saw her fall,' said the child. 'Mum thought I was in bed, but I couldn't sleep. I was looking out of the window at the fog. Then I saw the light in that window.'

She pointed to the top window.

'It wasn't very clear, because of the fog, but I saw her shape come to the window and get on the sill. I sometimes climb on to the sill like that. Mum doesn't know. You won't tell her, will you?'

'No, I won't tell her.'

'She stayed on the sill, then she jumped down. It was a silly thing to do. I wouldn't want to jump that far. The silly little girl just watched her,' she said self-righteously. 'I'd have stopped her if it had been me, but she just stood by the window and watched. She was a *silly* little girl.'

'A little girl?' I whispered, shivering, as I watched the sun die over the dark silhouettes of the houses.

'Yes,' said the child, as she turned to run off. 'A little girl with red hair.'